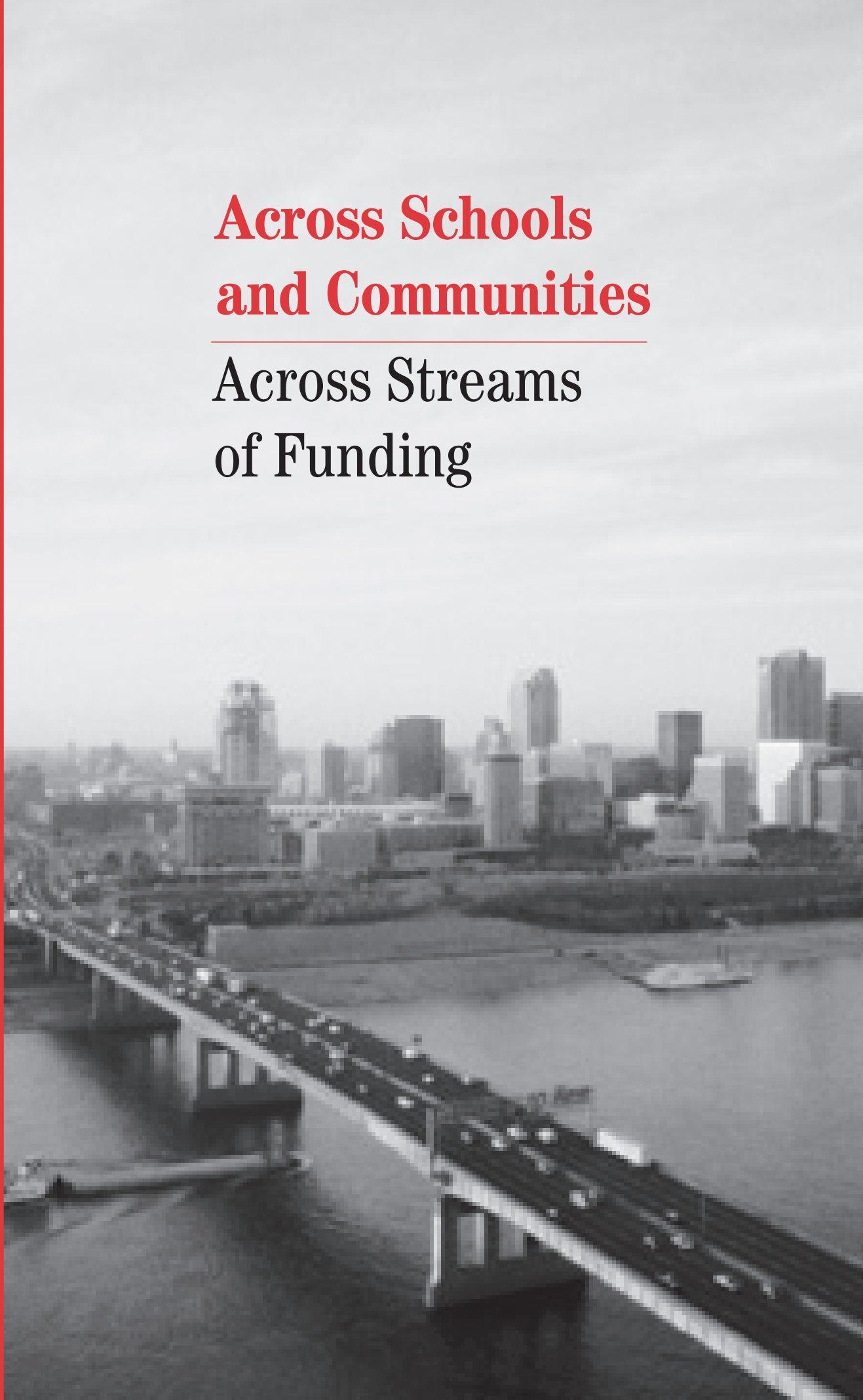
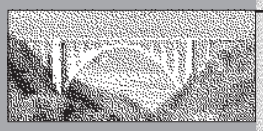
BUILDING.BRIDGES

# Across Schools and Communities

## Across Streams of Funding





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# Laying the Groundwork

*"Healthy schools and healthy communities depend on and nourish each other. Healthy schools aren't sustainable if their surrounding communities are in peril. Healthy communities can't exist for long if they fail to nurture productive, committed, engaged, aware, and resourceful citizens for the future."*

David Dodson

Brooklyn is an image in America of a place, distinctive for its baseball cheers and jeers, one of the country's first urban melting pots, a place of spirit and spunk. Walk the streets, however, and you find that it is many places and has grown more so in recent years, places for each successive wave of immigrant culture to keep itself apart from the rest. In the Williamsburg neighborhood, for example, an enclave of Hasidic Jews walled its school in like an island amidst a sea of other languages and cultures. The problems with schools and other institutions outside the wall went unrecognized by those within, creating misunderstandings and sometimes hostilities among those on the outside. Until one day when the struggles to get people in power to listen spilled into the streets of Brooklyn and the Williamsburg community and across the Williamsburg Bridge. People came together and marched for attention and action. They carried signs and sang chants, and some members of the Hasidic community joined them. As the demonstration reached the Bridge, one young Jewish student repeatedly tried to join the protesters chant in Spanish. He stumbled over the words, but by the time the crowd reached the other side of the Bridge, he knew it by heart. He was shouting with the rest: "El pueblo unido hamas sera vencido!" (The people united will never be defeated!)

In this true story, the bridge serves as a symbol of how unity can strengthen and bond different cultures to realize success, not defeat. It is an appropriate way to begin a conversation about bridging two groups with much in common—those who work hard to make schooling much better for children and those who are just as committed to revitalizing communities, especially in our poorest urban and rural areas. These groups need bridges to each other if their hopes and work are to flourish. The deep changes that are needed in schools and communities will not happen, observes Beverly Divers-White, vice president of the Foundation

CONTINUE

To fund efforts that bring different constituency groups together

for the Mid South, "until all segments of the community work together and together hold the systems accountable."

Her comments came at the opening of an unusual conference in the fall of 1997 that brought together community groups seeking education reforms and representatives from foundations that provide support for such efforts. Despite having the same goal—the well-being of children, families and communities—community-based education reformers and community builders and funders often do not connect. Many community organizations play a crucial role in reforming schools, but is that role well understood and appreciated? Many funders support efforts either for school reform or community renewal, frequently both, but do they realize how much these initiatives need to connect (both within the community *and* within their own foundations) to be effective and sustaining?

*"If we create community, all else will follow."*
Luis Garden Acosta, President, El Puente, Brooklyn

To begin conversations around building the necessary bridges to which these questions ultimately lead, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform invited community-based school reformers and funders to spend three days in Chicago becoming familiar with each other's work and aspirations. The reformers from over 20 sites across the country brought stories of remarkable accomplishments, some personal, some institutional, in rural as well as urban communities. More than 20 funders brought their perspectives on what they can do from the outside and what evidence of progress they need to fund or continue funding such efforts.

The conference's purpose, according to Anne Hallett, Cross City's executive director, was, first, "to name the work," —to underscore the essential role that community organizations play in school reform and the critical need for school and community connections. The conversations also sought to make the role of community organizations in school reform more visible and to broaden the thinking of funders beyond the categories that usually define their view of reform.

Despite their sometimes divergent viewpoints, the conference participants produced a consensus about why and how community-based reformers and funders can work together on common concerns. They began to build bridges.

## What Strong Schools and Strong Communities Share

Profiles of the efforts represented at the conference show that community renewal and school reform are shared work, said David Dodson, executive vice president of MDC, Inc., in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, at the opening of the

conference. Strong schools and strong communities are similar in many essential ways:

▶ ***They are clear about what matters most to them.*** They are guided and energized by clear values—core convictions about what every person deserves in a democracy. While "values" can be a loaded term, the concepts at the heart of flourishing schools and communities are those such as equity, excellence, inclusion and respect, all of which are inter-dependent.

▶ ***They have a clear vision of where they are headed.*** Their visions grow out of the values they hold and can be assessed through measurable outcomes. Strong schools and strong communities can answer such questions as: "What is the future we want? How should students, teachers, learning conditions and community conditions be different in 10 years? What is 'success' and how will we measure it? What outcomes are 'nonnegotiable' for us?"

▶ ***They live by a spirit of accountability to results***. Strong schools and communities cultivate a capacity for self-assessment and are able to ask and answer such questions as: "Are people becoming better off because of our efforts? Are we making progress toward our vision? If the results are not acceptable, who and what must change?"

▶ ***They nurture a spirit of efficacy, a prevailing sense of confidence that human action, however small, can have a positive impact, that people have the power to shape their environment, their choices and their future.*** Underlying this spirit is a belief in the basic intelligence and capacity of people to prevail in the face of challenges. Strong schools and communities invest in leadership development. They encourage disciplined reflection on the reasons behind successful and unsuccessful change efforts, and they use the lessons learned.

▶ ***They seek alignment between the values they hold and the actions they take.*** They use their values to scrutinize institutional attitudes and practices, and they act when there is tension between what they believe and the policies/practices of the institutions around them.

▶ ***They struggle to bridge the fault lines of race, class, culture and power inequality.*** They know that divisiveness and development—of people and of communities—cannot coexist.

If these common characteristics are valid, then the conference needed to find ways to help both schools and communities strengthen their capacity to adopt and adapt to these characteristics, Dodson said.

There are two caveats to the effort, however. The results obtained by the initiatives represented at the conference "took time to blossom and flourish," Dodson said. "The good news is that persistence pays off. But too much funding is still short-term in duration and small in scale."

Furthermore, the cultivation of trust between schools and communities is the lubricant for sustained change and enduring reform, but it is also often subterranean. "Its benefits are seldom immediate and usually are visible only to the faithful," he observed. Are funders patient and trusting enough to fund work that produces visible results only after years of effort?


Dodson's observations provided a framework for conference discussions; Garden Acosta and El Puente provided a visible example of a community determined to create a learning environment based on common values. The conference participants divided into small discussion groups where they discussed and responded to questions about the framework and the El Puente experience:

▶ **How do we help funders increase their attention spans?** Find out who is setting short deadlines for results, replied Dodson. If it is the trustees, appoint ones who take a long-range view. "You have to educate decision makers as to what evidence it is reasonable to expect to see after one or four years. Even by that time, a lot of the outcomes

## EL PUENTE: A VISIBLE 'BRIDGE' ACROSS CLASS, COLOR, CULTURE

"We had to construct a bridge—el puente—that would take us from hope to action. Our community in south side Williamsburg only has about 50,000 people, but like deadly clockwork, at least one adolescent would be gunned down each week. In 1981, we lost 48 young people to guns. We are a welfare neighborhood, as well as the most toxic one in New York City. We had the highest cancer and asthma rates in the city. About two-thirds of the adults did not graduate from high school, and they believed they never could. Our schools were on one side, our community on another, and we had to build a bridge. Now, we speak of schools becoming communities and community organizations becoming schools. Our first principle was not to have more high school graduates, but to create a sense of community. "The El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice came from the people who wanted love and caring in their schools. Everyone graduates from the academy, no matter how long it takes, but if its only purpose were to get young people to college, then we would have wasted their activism and energy. They built a park that is now the pride of the community, they planted hundreds of trees, they stopped an incinerator from coming into our community. They reached out to our Hasidic neighbors whose school was behind a wall, to the Polish community. We had not been talking to each other before, but we found common ground. We organized a demonstration with thousands of people walking over the Williamsburg Bridge to protest and we carried signs, "The People United Will Never Be Defeated." The teachers in our regular schools were tired; they wanted to be educators, to be champions of development of children. When we started talking about a common vision, they realized that we were giving them a chance to be alive again. Everything has to start with the community, whether in the schools or in community-based education. Together, we are deciding to build something for our community."

**Luis Garden Acosta**, President, El Puente, Brooklyn, New York

will still be subterranean and more about developing a common language and good relationships," he said.

▶ **Can we get a developmental mentality in schools and in communities?** People in the schools have to start from the basis of community values "but they are tired of being second-rate remediators, they want to be educators and champions of development," Garden Acosta replied. Go find examples of where people have come together around developmental goals for children and learn from them, added Dodson.

▶ **Can building a bridge start within a school system?** There are a few that have started within schools, but they could not be sustained without community support, Garden Acosta said. Also, "sometimes it is an issue of power, and sometimes that is so bad that the only thing to do is organize our communities" to end the school's monopoly on power.

▶ **How do you reconcile standards and standardization with the desire for community values and a sense of place?** Some of the community-building work is deeper and older than the school-reform work, Dodson pointed out. "The attributes people want can be cultivated over time when people are willing and the incentives are good enough," he said. Garden Acosta replied, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. We refused to seek waivers from the standards because that would be seen as going the easy way. Just do it," he advised. "Then do what you want." If you don't like the standards, try to change the standards.

▶ **How does the bridge go two ways, with schools informing communities and the other way around?** When the El Puente community was able to look at the United Federation of Teachers as individuals instead of the institution of the union, it was able to develop a concern for sharing, said Garden Acosta. A bridge implies two camps, added Dodson, "so you must keep people working toward the same ends, day in and day out."

▶ **How do parents make decisions about what will happen in classrooms?** The aim is not to focus on content, Garden Acosta advised, but "to get heavily involved in the program for their kids." A strong parent base will move politicians and, in the case of El Puente, give parents a school that the community owns. Parents were able to model the kind of growth and nurturing they wanted for their children in school, he said.

▶ **Are there any places that have achieved all the components of Dodson's framework?** Communities have come closer than schools, he said, because they deal with economic and social issues as well. "It is easier to talk about equity, for example, on a broader scale, much harder when the issue gets down to the classroom and to specifics," he said. It is important "to bring people to the table around values," which is a role foundations can play through incentives and the means to sustain such an effort.

# Logan Square Neighborhood Association

Healthy communities must have healthy schools. This was the premise of the initial efforts of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) to become involved with public school improvement in the Logan Square and Avondale communities of Chicago. That's only half of the story. The rest is about supporting the needs of parents, "who are crucial to having healthy schools," according to Nancy Aardema, executive director of LSNA.

The most visible results of LSNA's grassroots organizing are the new schools and school additions for the neighborhoods. An unheard of six projects were completed in a short period of time to ease overcrowding that had plagued the area for more than a decade. Less visible but even more important is how the campaign to win classroom space created opportunities "that go very deep into parents' lives."

- A grassroots organization serving two predominantly low-income communities in Chicago
- Is involved in a variety of school-related activities that have evolved over a 15-year period to support school reform
- Evidence of success both in relieving severe overcrowding in schools and in developing leadership skills of parents throughout the neighborhoods

LSNA serves a predominantly low-income, Latino population that is working its way up the economic ladder. Modest homes and apartments share the area with older, very expensive residential housing. LSNA also presses hard to maintain industrial zones in the community to assure jobs with adequate wages for residents.

Despite the mix in housing, schools in the neighborhoods enroll more than 90 percent low-income students. About two-thirds of the residents come from a variety of Spanish-speaking backgrounds—Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central America and South America. One-third of the students are not proficient in English.

In 1962, LSNA began to create working relationships among various interests in the communities such as churches, schools, social service agencies and individual members. Throughout the decades, its small staff has helped people identify issues and then learn how to work together to solve problems. The Association became more focused on school issues about 15 years ago. When the Chicago school reform law created local school councils, LSNA was in a position to encourage parents to run for the councils. The Association also earned respect for gaining the support of school administrators in working closely with parents.

The consensus that LSNA has fostered is one that envisions schools as much more deeply involved in their communities. The most obvious result of this belief is the creation of schools as community centers which are planned and run by parents. It started with a goal of LSNA leaders, parents and the staff at Funston Elementary School to open an after-hours community center in Funston's new building addition, one of the Association-induced victories for neighborhood students. With other community groups, LSNA helped the Funston Local School Council obtain seed money from the state to assess services for children and families in the school's neighborhood and to develop a community action plan that integrated services and made them more accessible. A small group of parents planned the effort, received training, knocked on more than 500 doors to interview community residents and businesses, and held rap sessions with each grade at the school.

The Funston Parent-to-Parent Community Center opened in April 1996, offering GED, ESL and other adult literacy classes; child care; support services; and recreational programs. Within less than a year, 42 residents had earned a GED, some of the parents on the planning committee had part-time jobs as parent coordinators, and Brentano Elementary School completed the same process to open its community center. "We have an agreement with the community to plan and open a community center in schools each year in the near future," says Aardema.

Preceding this exciting accomplishment were other school-community efforts that illustrate how LSNA creates opportunities for parents to figure out what they need and how to get it. The Parent/Teacher Mentoring Program provides training that helps parents develop personal goals and leadership skills. (The parents on the planning team at Funston were "graduates" of this program.) After completing the training, parents receive stipends for 100 hours of work in classrooms; parents and teachers participate in further training provided by LSNA. This mentoring encouraged some participants to apply to college, find jobs or get paid positions with the schools.

> ***"We got to know each other better and learned to trust each other...and we found what we as parents ar e capable of. Looking back, that was the gr eatest and most important part of the pr ocess—that we, par ents, did it."***
>
> Tammie Love, member of the planning team

The University of Illinois is now collecting hard data on the effects of this initiative, but the anecdotal data convince Aardema that children are benefiting greatly—schools report fewer discipline problems and absences and less tardiness. The academic achievement of children whose parents are part of the project has improved, Aardema says, and parents are checking up on homework and showing greater interest in what their children are learning. One mother in the program was especially proud—all eight of her children made the honor roll.

The effort also has changed teachers' perceptions of families, says Aardema, but an even more direct initiative sought to make teachers part of the neighborhood family. LSNA, through a housing coalition that it organized, convinced lenders to offer teachers incentives to purchase housing in the Logan Square community. During the six months that LSNA was involved, 14 teachers took advantage of the program. The program has since been taken over by the Board of Education and offered citywide. With these incentives, teachers can choose from such options as a lower down payment, no or lower points, or a lower interest rate.

LSNA responded to parents' concern about safety by helping them organize safety patrols around schools. LSNA also trains LSC members; helped organize tutoring centers; and works directly with students to do the same for them as for their parents—"figure out what they need and how to go out and get it."

LSNA has learned without a doubt that when parents get organized, they can be a powerful force for reconnecting schools to families and communities and for solving problems with their schools. Such empowerment improves their lives as well as their children's education. The lack of dependable funding hampers what LSNA would like to do, but its successes have helped it to further define its role in community-based school reform. According to Aardema, LSNA "must provide the table for people to come together around and support what they decide needs to be done."

# Tying Webs Initiative

At one time, the formal means for parents and community members to communicate with school leaders in Grand Rapids was formidable, to say the least. At school board meetings they were given three minutes to present their statements, and board members were not allowed to respond at the meeting. "There must be a compromise between this way of framing public response and confrontations that produce chaos," thought Beth Dilley, executive director of the Grand Rapids Public Education Fund (PEF).

At the same time, through their work in the Grand Rapids community and especially in inner-city neighborhoods, the PEF staff knew that people had concerns about school issues and were discussing them in other venues such as churches and neighborhood organizations. PEF organized its own forums and town meetings, and gained a sense of why low-income parents and people of color did not communicate directly with the schools. Whenever they did, says Dilley, they were devalued.

PEF already had several school-community programs underway. The Partnerships in Education matches businesses and community organizations with individual public schools. This 10-year-old program seeks personal involvement in the schools rather than donations and has stimulated activities from tutoring to consultation on systemwide policy reforms.

The Experience Exchange is another partnership initiative between businesses and schools that helps students connect classroom learning with work-related skills. Businesses throughout the county provide job shadowing, mentoring and internships for students. A federal school-to-work grant helps support this latter project; a local foundation provides most of the remaining PEF support.

The gulf in understanding between all schools and neighborhoods called for a different approach, however. PEF decided that only organized communities could address the attitudinal barriers that existed. (Perhaps these barriers were not deliberate, but they were nevertheless very real for parents who felt left on the outside.) Schools are professional communities, Dilley points out, and people who are not part of that culture, who speak another language or who are not as well educated, are not valued by it. Three years ago, for example, PEF gathered planning teams from each school participating in the Partnerships in Education initiative and organized a meeting to discuss neighborhood association boundaries. "We saw immediately that school people needed to understand neighborhoods," says Dilley. "They discredited the contributions of students and parents."

Bringing together a strong network of 20 or more neighborhood associations in Grand Rapids, PEF canvassed their interest in improving neighborhood schools. PEF is now working with about a dozen of the associations on a strategy to use the strengths of people and neighborhoods to bring about school

- A community development program of the Grand Rapids PEF that helps community teams identify assets among the people and local resources and then use the information to improve communities and schools
- Works to build coalitions to overcome the distance between grassroots leadership and the schools, identifies leadership and develops measures for accountability
- Has developed a set of indicators to help communities and schools determine strengths and weaknesses and hold schools accountable for student performance

reform. This strategy is called "asset mapping." It stems from the basic beliefs that created the Tying Webs Initiative:

- Every neighborhood has individuals and organizations with assets and talents.
- Children exist in communities, not in school buildings.
- Working together, people create their own community. Neighborhood development is best accomplished from the inside out.
- Sustainable efforts only occur when new leaders are continually trained and developed.
- People with access to good information will make the best decisions for themselves.

Asset mapping, developed through trial and error with the associations and a consultant, helps community members make these beliefs come alive. By identifying neighborhood strengths and resources, the people who live in the neighborhood build a positive base for organizing and making their presence felt. Asset mapping also is a tool for the development of community leadership, providing extended training and ways for leadership teams to reach out to neighborhood residents and involve them in community improvement. PEF staff sought leadership development for themselves, too. One member, for example, attended training on community organizing offered by the Industrial Areas Foundation.

"We now have a formal structure for leadership development with neighborhood associations," says Dilley. "The next step is to institutionalize leadership training within the associations so that they can offer continual development."

Asset mapping also addresses the need for data. The effort to gather data has brought schools and grassroots neighborhood associations together in a cooperative rather than a confrontational manner. PEF asked the school system to work with the Tying Webs Initiative on providing data by neighborhoods rather than by school boundaries. The 25 indicators drawn up by the community have been accepted by the Grand Rapids school board as measures of school and community performance. Wherever possible, PEF is providing data on the indicators by neighborhood. Leadership teams from the neighborhood associations have held meetings with the schools to discuss actions that need to be taken. A goal of PEF is to use new technologies to create a solid database on how well schools and communities are achieving their educational goals and to report the data aggressively to the community.

Dilley is optimistic about the cooperation of the schools on grassroots improvement efforts, but she acknowledges that some mistrust still exists. "Both schools and parents feel they will get beat up if they open up to each other, and that others don't understand the conditions under which they must operate in urban areas," she says. The experience so far has opened up PEF, however. Representatives of neighborhood associations have been added to its governing board.

> ***"We learned how integrated this work is. Kids move among interr e-lated systems."***
>
> Beth Dilley

The lessons of PEF's grassroots organizing have as much to do with process as with identifiable outcomes. When PEF realized that children, schools and neighborhoods are all one, it focused less on schools and more on neighborhood capacity building. The experience also has been one of building trust, respecting the pace of effort that others will put into activism and offering opportunities to make changes that people want rather than proscribing solutions.

PEF also learned to listen very differently and especially to notice the silences —whose voices are silenced and in what ways? And, PEF realized parents are not as unorganized as originally thought and certainly not "uncaring," as some try to characterize them. They are just organized in areas other than in schools.

The most useful role for PEF as an organizer for school reform is to be a truth teller. Given solid data in such areas as student achievement, "people will get past a lot of the subjective stuff very quickly," says Dilley. "We are learning to do truth telling without placing blame."

# The Bridges Take Shape

Compelling, richly personal stories about community-based school reforms provided the core of discussions at the conference. A panel representing each of the eight case profiles selected as background for the agenda elaborated on what their efforts accomplished and how. Responding to questions from moderator Peter Martinez, senior program officer of the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the panelists reported that:

- **They created a sense of place:** *"In our small rural community, we started with talk about where we live. We educate the community about the community and come to understand the place."* Jim Lenz, Howard, South Dakota

- **They developed enduring relationships.** *"We spent a lot of time changing relationships, helping people to value themselves and to develop comfort and confidence in coming to the table. . . . We changed the culture to one of respect."* Beth Dilley, Grand Rapids, Michigan

- **They empowered people.** *"The greatest amount of change has been within parents themselves. They realize they do have a legitimate role in the schools."* Gary Rodwell, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

- **They erased the boundaries between schools and communities.** *"We create opportunities for community members to see the school. We do this by giving students work that takes them out into the community so people can see what they are doing. We want to make the boundaries so fluid that you don't feel you're in one or the other."* Jack Shelton, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

- **They formed community around schools.** *"We have created a sustained conversation among the most important institutions in the community–churches, schools and civic organizations. Involving the community in developing a vision means creating a culture of conversation, understanding and exchange of interests."* Joe Higgs, Houston, Texas

- **They need foundations to help them bring about a culture of learning.** *"This is exciting work, but it takes a lot of money and time. We need flexibility, we need to focus on parents and building their capacities, and we need to constantly build collaborations."* Amanda Rivera, Chicago, Illinois


*Jim Lenz* *Amanda Rivera*

## The Bridges Take Shape

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the brief portraits of eight community-based school reform efforts presented at the conference were weighty words indeed. Equally valuable were the words of those who told the conference about the efforts their goals, their victories and problems, and their insights. The panel included:

**Beth Dilley**, Executive Director of the Grand Rapids Public Education Fund, Grand Rapids, Michigan

**Nila Edwards**, parent leader with ACORN, New York City, New York

**Joe Higgs**, lead organizer for the Interfaith Education Fund/Texas Metropolitan Organization, Houston, Texas

**Jim Lenz,** Superintendent, Howard, South Dakota Schools

**Amanda Rivera**, then a teacher and now Ames Middle School Principal and First Vice President of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Chicago, Illinois

**Gary Rodwell**, Executive Director of the Alliance Organizing Project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Yolanda Sethi**, teacher at the Ochoa Elementary School/Educational and Community Change Project, Tucson, Arizona

**Jack Shelton**, Director of the Program for Rural Services and Research, PACERS, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Panel moderator, **Peter Martinez**, a former community organizer who is now with the J. D. and C. T. MacArthur Foundation, led the panel discussion through a series of questions aimed at "defining the work" and discovering the lessons learned about community-based school reform.

## How did they start?

In Howard, South Dakota, creating a sense of place started with "talk about where we live. . . . Until people in the community understand their place, we cannot go any farther," said Jim Lenz. The talk helped people understand their circumstances and what created a depressed farm economy, but the talk began among students who studied the area's history and analyzed its economy, and who shared their knowledge at home. Then the schools were made available to the community to build involvement in renewal.


*Nila Edwards* *Beth Dilley*


*Gary Rodwell* *Joe Higgs*


In the changing community of Chicago's Logan Square Neighborhood Association, groups at several different schools had tried to get attention to serious overcrowding, "but we didn't have enough power," said Amanda Rivera. "The neighborhood association, though, pulled us together."

The Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia realized right away that its engagement with parents "could not be done in a vacuum," said Gary Rodwell. Public discussion of the issues tended to ignore cultural and equity concerns, "but we needed to put these in a societal and political context, to educate parents that you cannot address things without the political context."

For parents in Brooklyn whose children were being bused to schools far away, New York ACORN began by informing parents of their rights, and then helped them obtain a school in their own community. "We also learned," said Nila Edwards, "that the schools should be held accountable."

The PACERS project in rural Alabama uses student contributions to

their communities, organized by the schools "to do away with the boundaries between schools and communities," according to Jack Shelton. This builds on the premise that people in schools want to reach out and that communities need opportunities to see the work of schools.

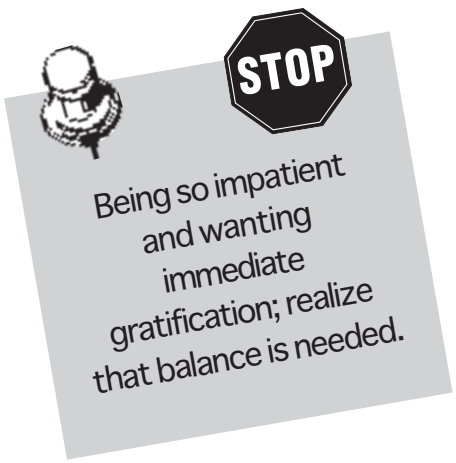
Organizing parents around improving schools in Houston began by helping them to understand schools and what a good education would look like, said Joe Higgs. "You can't just tell everyone to do what he or she wants," he explained. "You must get across to teachers and parents the best ideas and information." The next step is to enable parents and teachers to have conversations together that identify the issues around which they can take collaborative action.

It took a long time for the teachers at Ochoa Elementary School in Tucson to realize they could and should take time to reflect on their teaching and its ties to the community, said Yolanda Sethi. "Building trust with parents was really incredible, and it depended on the dialogue between teachers and parents," she noted. "The attitudes shifted from 'us against them' to being together on what we wanted to do for kids. We now talk about the community as one."

In Grand Rapids, parents in poor communities had felt excluded from decisions, but the Grand Rapids Education Fund helped them organize and decide what they and the community would like to see happening for children, according to Beth Dilley. The parents studied data to develop indicators of successful outcomes, which are now being used by the school district, and parents felt empowered enough to invite the superintendent to talk with them.

## What are the Essentials?

As the panel participants went deeper into their accomplishments, it became evident that Dodson's "subterranean" effects were at work. To obtain better outcomes for students and to strengthen communities—the focus of most reforms—the efforts depended on building strong, trusting relationships between schools and parents and between parents and community advocates. These necessarily came before more traditional, measurable outcomes, although the panelists presented those, too.




In Houston, "we have gotten parents and teachers to see each other through a different set of eyes," said Higgs. Where that has occurred, student achievement is rising, but he believes equally important results are just as visible—more parents are involved in the schools and there are more activities after school for children that are created and directed by teachers and parents together.

Student achievement measures were important to parents and the community in Grand Rapids, but "what we heard most from both parents and the business community was the need for measures that showed change in the level of respect between the community and the schools," said Dilley. These became the basis of the indicators developed by parents and the community. Similarly, Rivera reported that the most significant accomplishment in the Logan Square Neighborhood Association effort "was the transformation of the relationships between teachers and parents."

The panel presented concrete evidence of the results of community-based school reform, as well. The students in Howard, for example, surveyed all houses in the community, documenting cash flow and publishing a report that pointed out if people spent at least 10 percent more in the community each year, tax revenues could increase by at least $2 million. One year later, the tax revenues were up 27 percent and have continued to climb, according to Lenz.

Logan Square parents conducted surveys to find out what the community needed, which resulted in community centers at schools that made services more accessible to families. Rivera also emphasized that the process made it possible to have people in the community "who can organize around issues and use the political system."

## The Money Factor

Sufficient funding is not the most important ingredient for the success of community-based reforms, the panel indicated, but it is critical. "Money gave us time to have dialogues together during the day, to find networking support, to tap into knowledge," said Sethi. Pointing out that transforming schools and communities "is not charity work," Shelton said funding was needed to provide support, give teachers time to

work with communities, and build a culture that will persist through turnovers and other changes. For Edwards and Rodwell, funding is necessary to strengthen community activism in New York City and Philadelphia; it gives parents access to professional staff who support them as they develop their leadership skills. More funding is needed to stabilize such support. "So often an organizer who is doing good work leaves because the pay is just not enough," Edwards said. Several panelists mentioned that foundation funding provided a leverage for initiatives to gain support from other sources.

Finally, Rivera wanted funders to understand that community-based reform "is exciting and meaningful work," requiring both money and time. The amount of time it will take before funders and communities can expect measurable results was a key point in the discussion between panelists and other conference participants. Lenz estimated that it can take 20 years—or two generations—before communities see the results of wholesale change. However, benchmarks could be established along the way, said others. Determining what it takes to be successful, knowing how to establish an ongoing and dynamic effort and developing benchmarks are ways funders and community-based school reformers can chart their progress. Some of the possible benchmarks for success include such things as seeing more parents participating at schools, establishing networks among change-oriented schools and communities, changing teacher preparation, providing greater support for students in and out of school time, and creating systemic changes at district and state levels.

## IT'S BEEN A STRUGGLE...

"I live in a horrible community district in New York City. My four children have gone through the public schools because I couldn't afford to send them to private schools, and I have fought to make sure they got what they needed. It's been a struggle. Why should I have to ask why half of our computers are broken, while other districts have all they need? Why were teachers who didn't want to change to make things better for kids still in classrooms? That's why I got involved. It took three to four years to get anyone to listen, and even though I work full time, I would take time off to go ask questions.

"Our kids were being bused far out of the community, but ACORN people helped us realize that we had a right to have our own school in our own community. That's how we started PS 245. I also learned that we should demand schools be accountable. I knew kids were not being properly educated, but ACORN helped me and other parents learn to ask how the money was being spent and what kind of academic program schools were providing. I wished schools would reach out to us or wanted parents to reach in, but they didn't.

"We opened a new school a year ago. Seventy percent of the students came in reading two to three grades below grade level, but in our first year, 27 percent of the kids passed the math Regents' Exam. We have a real working relationship with teachers and the principals, and we hold each other accountable. Whether we know or don't know details about the curriculum, we know what we want for our kids. We held meetings about what we want our kids to—do to think and analyze, to go to college, to be able to get a good job. We would stay up late at night at the ACORN office just talking about such things. This made it possible for us to ask the right questions of teachers in interviews. We visited other schools in other neighborhoods and observed teachers. We would ask ourselves: `Is this teacher chalk and talk, or innovative and creative?'

"What we've done has caused us to develop relationships with other community groups and boards, with politicians and with people who first fought us tooth and nail. We have organized around day care and stop lights. People in the community now know they do have a voice and can fight for whatever they need."

**Nila Edwards**, parent leader, ACORN, New York City

# Alliance Organizing Project

The Alliance Organizing Project for Education Reform (AOP) in Philadelphia is an "early work," barely two years old, but has the potential for creating changes in the city's schools that inner-city parents and advocates for children have long wanted but never seemed to be able to get started. Parents have been actively trying to improve the quality of education in Philadelphia, but previous efforts generally were limited in scope and to certain parts of the city.

The AOP is grassroots, focused and tough. It's the sort of initiative that would alarm most school officials. The difference in Philadelphia is that the superintendent of schools "more than encouraged us to organize," says Gary Rodwell, executive director of AOP. "He made it part of his vision."

Public engagement is one of the components of Superintendent David Hornbeck's ambitious goals for turning around a school system where student failure had become an accepted norm.

His Children Achieving Agenda envisions parents as partners, but such a step requires parents to become organized outside the school system. A group of school reform advocates also saw the need for such organizing around instructional issues and helped launch AOP in 1995. Rodwell, trained as an organizer by the Industrial Areas Foundation and working as an IAF trainer nationally, assumed the leadership.

AOP's training institutes provide resources that teach people how to be organizers. The project also hires organizers directly to work with neighborhoods. In Philadelphia, this tends to follow the cluster organization for schools where reform actions take place at a high school and all of its feeder schools. AOP's work is funded by local foundations and the Annenberg Challenge.

In Philadelphia's low-income communities, "the culture of the schools is not one that respects parents for being able to create substantial change," Rodwell says candidly. When parents talk about school issues, educators become uncomfortable, and parents "get classified as troublemakers."

To give parents the power to overcome such perceptions, AOP follows a five-step organizing process. With this process, parents and organizers:

- Meet individually
- Conduct a "listening" campaign to find out what parents like and dislike about their schools
- Research issues they uncover during the "listening" campaign
- Hold public actions with decision makers about their concerns
- Reflect on their efforts to plan next steps

When AOP began organizing, it found many reasons for parental concern. Low expectations for their children and a lack of accountability contributed to problems already endemic to their communities such as high unemployment and low literacy levels. However, AOP organizers took notice of one comment from the mother of a second grader: "We know what to organize against; it's not as clear what we should organize for." When representatives of the leadership teams from about 40 schools came together, they decided they needed to develop a vision of what they wanted for their schools. They began by visiting other schools in low-income communities where students were succeeding academically. AOP helped the parents draw up a list of sites to visit and questions to ask on the visits. Over a two-month period in the spring of 1997, teams of five to 10 AOP representatives toured schools in Philadelphia, New York City, Chicago and Houston.

In sometimes emotional reports back to community meetings, the teams told of seeing children like their own who were excelling because of:

- A vision and organizing principle around high expectations for students
- Teaching and learning that was committed to the vision and checked by regular assessments
- Ongoing professional development shaped by student needs
- Creative use of available monies

These schools provided "no excuses" education without magic. According to an AOP report, "Our visits put one lingering myth finally to rest: In spite of what we have all been told, children from disadvantaged neighborhoods can succeed academically."

As a follow-up step, AOP enlisted the principals and parents from eight of the visited schools to participate in a conference where they shared what the teams had seen and planned next steps. As a result of organizing efforts, parents are beginning to show up in large numbers at some schools; they are becoming involved in school improvement plans. AOP estimates about 500 parents have become active in school improvement because of the early organizing efforts. Sometimes parents are drawn in by specific problems, such as broken equipment that needs to be fixed, a drive to get more library books, or work on improving the school lunch program. These small projects lead to larger organizing efforts.

- A community organizing effort to help parents hold the community and schools accountable for the quality of education children receive
- Trains parents on specific skills they need such as research, decision making, identifying issues, negotiation and taking public actions
- Helped parents research and plan visits to exemplary sites where they learned how to organize schools so that all children succeed academically

At some schools, parent involvement has been welcomed. At others, says Rodwell of his early efforts at organizing, "The parents are called Communists." Unfortunately, he adds, "We get the greatest resistance where we are needed the most."

From these individual school reform efforts, AOP will build a citywide coalition "so that we have a large enough force to negotiate with those making decisions that affect the schools," says Rodwell. The city council and the mayor, for example, determine the school budget. Even though AOP has the blessing of the school superintendent, "that does not mean there are no areas of tension between the district and parents," he says. The unique partnership, however, fosters respect for each other's points of view. Rodwell is confident that the superintendent "trusts the integrity of our process."

In the short time that AOP has been in Philadelphia, Rodwell says he has learned there are teachers and principals in the school system searching for ways to do their jobs better. What's more important, however, is that he and the parents know they "can change those schools" where there is resistance to accountability and to parent empowerment. In the past, when parents identified problems or asked for additional services such as a bilingual teacher or a full-day kindergarten, they had to struggle with bureaucracy and stonewalling by the district. Since AOP helped parents organize and insist on change, however, about 400 of those parents at one particular school took action, and the bureaucracy listened. These parents obtained the bilingual teacher, a full-day kindergarten and after-school activities.

The road ahead is "hard gospel," Rodwell says. The inadequate education provided for Philadelphia's inner-city children did not develop overnight, nor will the advocacy needed for school reform. Rodwell believes, however, there is no other choice for the future of children, families and the city.

# Interfaith Education Fund

***"El poso—that is our biggest worry ."***

Estella Soza Garza heard this over and over again as she talked to parents whose children attended a low-income school in McAllen, Texas. El poso, it turned out, was a large gravel pit left by construction workers 20 years ago that had become a hiding place for drug dealers and thieves who broke into homes near the pit. Residents had petitioned to have it removed, but city officials ignored their complaints. Soza Garza, however, is a trained organizer with Valley Interfaith. It is her job to help parents and communities learn how to work together to solve problems. When the el poso problem came up as she began to work on school-community reform efforts two years ago, Soza Garza organized a meeting of 70 residents and a few city officials. The troublesome el poso not only was filled, but has since become a lighted recreational area for the neighborhood with walking trails and ball courts planned for the future.

Once parents realized they could organize, conduct research and have an effect, "they gained confidence and a sense of ownership," says Soza Garza. "They were ready to tackle issues with the neighborhood school." With this school, the entree for organizing parents around school reform came from a community problem. Often, however, the event that opens up a school to change comes from within.

At Palmer Elementary School in Pharr, teachers were often dismayed by their students who came to school with muddied clothes. Not until Valley Interfaith helped the school organize teacher visits to the children's homes did teachers realize the conditions in which their students lived. Las Milpas is the largest colonia in Hidalgo County, and like most of the colonias along the Texas-Mexico border, residents lack running water and sewage systems. The teachers also realized how difficult it was for parents to feel comfortable at the school —the cultural gulf was too big. Now, says Soza Garza, the school holds orientation nights before school starts to introduce parents to staff and to school routines. Palmer and a middle school also schedule parenting classes and house meetings in the colonias and provide buses for big events at the schools. They take the school to the parents.

"It's a matter of being creative and making schools accessible to parents," says Soza Garza, who works for Valley Interfaith. Active in the Rio Grande Valley for several years, Valley Interfaith's more recent focus on

- An effort to organize local communities to take charge of solutions for such problems as education, housing and employment in low-income communities in the state
- Works through relationships and commitments from people to improve conditions by providing training and organizing support, and through collective action to affect policymaking
- Created a network of public schools, the Alliance Schools Initiative, that is committed to improving the education of low-income students in Texas and three other states

schools has enlisted 15 schools across the Valley along the Mexican border for the Alliance Schools Initiative. This statewide effort is coordinated by the Interfaith Education Fund in Austin. The Initiative aims to improve schools for low-income children by organizing parents and communities around reform action.

Soza Garza most often interests parents by just talking to them about their concerns, then talking to principals and teachers. Experienced in organizing through churches, she finds the Alliance effort "more work because schools are not natural communities like churches. It is harder to bring people together." Most of the parents she contacts are poor, Hispanic, not skilled at speaking English and often newly immigrated. Schools with their "experts" can be formidable places for these parents. Parents are accustomed to going to schools only when there is a problem, so it is difficult to convince them they belong there at other times. "It is a long way," says Soza Garza, "from asking 'Did my child behave?' to asking, 'What is my child learning?'"

Slowly, however, schools in this isolated part of Texas are learning to accept parents as partners and respect what parents bring to the table. Teachers plan curriculum and activities around their new knowledge about the families they serve. Relationships are a big part of the Alliance schools, with parents, teachers and principals attending workshops and meetings together. Soza Garza believes her efforts pay off "when I see teachers and parents go off together to discuss such things as multiple intelligences and team teaching."

This story about the Alliance schools in the Valley is being written throughout the Southwest by the Interfaith Education Fund (IEF), which is connected to the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation. The latter is the regional representative of the highly successful grassroots effort that began in Chicago in the 1940s. The Industrial Areas Foundation is now active in many areas of the country. Its initial reputation was one of confrontation, which is still used when necessary, but the IEF's process in Texas and neighboring states is marked more by collaboration and collective commitment to school reform.

IEF works locally, but the Alliance schools also participate in a movement with other committed parents, teachers and administrators. As many as 1,000 have attended statewide meetings to learn from each other and from experts brought in by IEF. Starting with 17 schools in the 1992-93 school year, the Alliance now includes 120 schools and another 50 to 60 schools that maintain informal associations, according to Carrie Jo Laughlin, IEF staff researcher. There are Alliance schools also in New Mexico, Arizona and Louisiana.

The Alliance Schools Initiative has been shaped by IEF's director, Ernesto Cortes, Jr., who views power not as a negative force but as "the ability to act." Community organizing around each school's unique problems or issues is more than a way to reform schools, in his opinion. It is a means of rebuilding a civic culture. Once parents and others take ownership of their neighborhoods, the quality of life improves and "their involvement begins to change the very nature of power and politics in their communities."

Early on, Cortes and IEF gained support from policymakers and state officials. As a result, the Alliance is a partnership among IEF, IAF, the state's regional education service centers and the Texas Education Agency. The Alliance works with local site parents, staff and school district leaders. Mike Moses, state commissioner of education, acknowledges that the Alliance has built "powerful relationships."

The legislature also is impressed. It has increased the monies in an Investment Capital Fund administered by Moses' agency three times, beginning with $2 million and increasing it to $8 million for the biennium that began in 1997. Alliance schools compete for the money, which can be as much as

$45,000 per school to fund reforms in four areas: staff development, parent and community development, innovations in teaching and assessment, and after-school enrichment programs. Schools must have broad-based community support; the state agrees to expedite requests for waivers from regulations for the Alliance schools.

At the local level, IEF defines an Alliance school as one that:

- Clearly defines what students should learn
- Focuses on academic results and higher-order skills
- Reduces or eliminates barriers to reforms
- Gives parents, teachers and administrators maximum flexibility in reforming their schools
- Reaches out to its community to involve others in reforms and to maintain conversations about school/community collaborations.

The Alliance Schools Initiative is a visible success. It has encouraged the development of thousands of parent leaders among the schools and earned recognition from local, state and national leaders. Most important, student academic achievement has improved in the Alliance schools. Two years after the initiative started, three-fourths of the Alliance Schools improved their schoolwide scores on the state assessment. Of the 50 schools that have been part of the project since at least 1993, 31 have improved their scores each year.

The success of the Alliance schools does not always come easy, says Laughlin. “One of our biggest barriers is the bureaucratic culture of the schools that sets them up as the experts.” The effort also has revealed how little communication goes on within schools, much less with parents. This lack of communication often shows itself in an attitude by educators that the Alliance effort “is just another reform idea like all the others they have been bombarded with,” says Laughlin. Principals and teachers, however, take notice when other schools in the Alliance succeed. “They come to us because of our track record,” Laughlin says. “They understand results.”

# Design Issues: For School and Communities

The case studies and a vision paper prepared by John Kretzmann helped conference participants organize their thoughts and questions before coming to Chicago. These formed the basis for small-group discussions that integrated the "lessons-learned" conversation with those who practice community-based school reforms. Generally, the discussions made these points:

**Building leadership and constituency** must come from the community and schools themselves and be grounded in them. *"You shouln't have leadership workshops presented **to** people. They need opportunities to **do** leadership."*

**Organizing for quality and improving student achievement** must take standardized test scores into consideration as an indicator but go beyond them to develop ways to measure success in schools and in communities over time. "We know that grades and scores don't predict lifetime success, but we don't know what does."

**Going beyond parent involvement** means working across schools and communities to create networks and developing an inclusive environment. "The goal should be to achieve mutual accessibility between the school and the community."

**Building school system capacity and overcoming resistance** depend on strong relationships that will last over time and empower constituents. *"We struggle with the idea of blowing it all up and starting all over again, but we always keep coming back and trying to find an entry into reform because the school system is the only player in equity."*

**Expanding educational resources** will require going beyond standard measures of quality and engaging the community in deciding what the educational experiences for children will be. "If communities learn what is possible, a paradigm shift can occur. Parents, once vested in a school, increase the quality of the school. Education and community have to be one thing."

**Developing new structures, policies and funding** requires recognizing the value of community organizing—and funding it sufficiently. *"We need to legitimize organizing local communities, perhaps using the rationale of giving consumers a voice."*

**Making the community the site for "school work"** is an important lesson urban communities can learn from rural ones. *"The fluidity that we want between schools and communities means redefining learning and where it takes place."*

CONTINUE

To encourage regular, ongoing dialogue across sectors, programs, cultures, etc. informed by both research and practice (broad discussion).

## Design Issues: For Schools and Communities

Drawing from responses submitted by conference participants before they convened in Chicago, the planners grouped concerns into six categories. In small-group sessions, participants asked difficult questions and prioritized the most urgent issues in community-based school reform that need to be addressed.

## Building Leadership and Constituency

▶ *What are the roles of parents and community leaders in leading school reform and community development agendas? How are leaders identified, developed and supported? How is a broad constituency developed to support the work? Why is this important? How do you identify allies and partners and what are their roles?*

The only way to create real change in education is to capitalize on the self-interests of the community and to build indigenous leadership and self-determination. Leadership exists within schools as well, but in both communities and schools, leaders are vulnerable to being "eaten up." That's why efforts to build leadership need to support those who are indigenous to communities and schools—often they have done more and offer more than is assumed. Also, effective leaders understand equity issues, and at the local level that frequently means moral leadership derived from a spiritual base.

Parents who are encouraged to become leaders need to have this grounding in community because they have the ability to influence others. Parents need help in various ways when they assume leadership roles in change understanding their rights even if they cannot express them eloquently, or


being prepared for the obstacles and barriers they may encounter. Parents also need to know that they are not alone in wanting a better education for their children. Such efforts at building leadership among parents needs dedicated time and resources. These efforts cannot be conducted "on the sly."

Foundations need hands-on experience in learning how leadership works in communities. Instead of putting out an Request For Proposals for leaders, "they should hang out in communities and see where the leaders are and learn what support they need."

## Organizing for Quality and Improving Student Achievement

▶ *How can the skills of good organizers be used on specific school/community issues? How do we measure student achievement as a result of relationships between schools and community? Why is organizing an important strategy in low-income areas for engaging the community in schools? What strategies of community/school partnerships are most likely to result in improved student achievement? How can data be used to support the work?*

Organizing communities to support school reforms takes place along a continuum that builds from people's immediate needs to more complicated academic achievement issues. The end of the continuum, however, is not test scores. Rather, such traditional measures must be expanded to include other measures of educational achievement and community development. What community-based school reform must construct is a parent/community vision of what it means for a young person to be prepared for continuing education, work and citizenship.

Existing definitions also are different for different folks. Affluent parents, for example, demand more than results on standardized tests, but even though there is an "over focus" on test scores in low-income schools, parents in these schools usually favor "doing well" on standardized tests as a fair measure of their students' success. Use of such data can expand people's ideas about what is quality, such as exposing the extent of

academic tracking. Schools and communities need to collaborate on deciding the markers for student success and realize that these markers change over time.

Still, to have a real impact on learning and teaching, schools need a critical mass of organized parents. The development of groups of organized parents also occurs along a continuum that begins small, is sensitive to local needs and builds into informed leadership.

Basically, the improvement of student achievement and the assurance of quality schools depend on answering two questions: What are the indicators for student achievement beyond standardized tests? And, what are the conditions that get parents to focus on teaching-learning-success issues and encourage them to take action?

## Building School System Capacity and Overcoming Resistance

▶ *How do you prepare and support schools so they can be effective partners with the community? How do we find and develop the necessary resources of time and capacity to carry out critical reform agendas? How do we motivate resistant systems to reconnect with the community?*

The education institution's capacity right now to outlast change agents' agendas, such as from the community, makes it necessary for reformers to build relationships with each other and with educators that will last over time. The discussion at first focused on barriers—the tendency for outside reform efforts to become marginalized for various reasons. However, the experiences of practitioners in the discussion argued for articulating the benefits of change to those running school systems. They don't want to fail, either, it was pointed out. That effort needs to be supported by building a political constituency that addresses power issues. As one participant said: "We have to be smart about power. You cannot just go into discussions about what is right. You have to get into conversations about what we can bring to the table."

However, confrontation is not the best way to create change. Power analysis is not a set up for conflict but, rather, a means of understanding power relationships in schools and knowing how to leverage them. Organizers are learning which levels of the school bureaucracy to focus on, and schools are beginning to learn to include all stakeholders. Change might occur because of competition to the public schools or through legislative mandates, but equally important are patience and long lasting relationships among leaders.


It also is important for funders, reformers and school leaders to admit failures when they occur and learn from them. This can help build relationships. Finally, students should be given a voice in reforms.

## Expanding Educational Resources

▶ *How do we help instructional leaders understand the value of building on students' experiences, using community expertise as starting places for successful educational achievement? What is required to help school staff and community members rethink their conception of "school"? What are strategies for teaching a real community curriculum?*

An important outcome is that community people not just engage in conversations, but that the conversation shifts to new ideas that can change the community. Currently, the conversation is constrained by the importance given to standardized tests, which serve political purposes, are based on old paradigms of success and encourage limited teaching focused on the test.

When students do their "work" in the community, as in the PACERS project, they draw upon the experience of elders, and the school becomes a venue for saving their experience and wisdom. Similarly, starting conversations between schools and parents must start with recognizing that parents have powerful interests and knowledge that need to be used.

States may rely on standardized scores, but students and parents can learn to assess both the problems they face and the solutions. They can learn to become actively involved in the community. As a result of reform efforts that go beyond standardized tests, such as exhibitions and/or portfolios that reflect students' actual work in their communities, a lot of students' expectations are raised, as are those of some teachers and a few district superintendents. The value of using alternative assessments needs to be understood by everyone from parents to university professors. Superintendents, for example, often don't understand that exhibitions demonstrate student knowledge more authentically than standardized tests.

The central issue, then, is: there must be mutual accessibility between school and community to develop definitions together and achieve common aspirations. In this endeavor, funders can use their expertise to broker contacts among communities. They also can provide "political space" by influencing policymaking.

## Developing Policies, New Structures and Funding

▶ *What policies and funding at the school, district and state levels should be changed to support the community's role in schools more effectively? What are strategies for making such policy changes? Should the work of school and community be institutionalized through new structures? If so, what might they be?*

Again, the issue of unequal power pervades the issues of structures, policies and funding. One participant pointed out that unless parents are organized, they will be out-maneuvered. The challenges are to:

Maintain a critical mass of organizers who are training parents, holding public officials accountable and getting results. Qualified talent is needed, but the pay for them is insufficient. Stable, diverse funding streams are necessary to provide parents with the support they need.

Determine the proper role for government. The legislature can provide strategic entry points and a structure for meaningful social change," said one participant. "But we also must have an organized community to take advantage of this structure." Similarly, charter school legislation might strengthen the hand of community organizations, but it also could draw off support for system-wide change.

# PACERS of Rural Alabama

As rural communities across the nation know too well, once their schools are closed or consolidated, the community, too, begins to close down. Since the beginning of public education, schools have been the centers of community life in rural areas. Without them, there often is no place for the community to gather, and a vital way to share common values is lost. Rural schools of today, survivors of massive consolidations 40 years ago, are either tremendously isolated or constantly struggling to hold fast to their uniqueness rather than give way to urbanized ideas about schooling.

Some rural schools in Alabama, however, have found strength in numbers and in advocacy through the Program for Rural Services and Research (PRSR) at the University of Alabama. PRSR helped these rural schools form the PACERS Cooperative and organizes both support from the resources of the university and advocacy throughout the campus for the needs and interests of rural communities. PRSR cosponsors the PACERS Cooperative with Alabama Citizens for Excellence in Small Schools (ACCESS), which is a statewide network for small school support.

A successful foundation-funded scholarship program for rural teachers who want to become certified in foreign languages started discussions among rural educators about what else they could do together. A planning grant from foundations led to the creation of PACERS in 1992. The new cooperative brought together 29 small schools willing to demonstrate that they could successfully engage students in community life and engage communities in improving schools. The PACERS cooperative banner is, "Better Schools Building Better Communities."

Through an ongoing planning process, "the community tells us what they want to do," according to Jon Chalmers, program officer for the PACERS project. When the initial planning took place, the project realized there were some common themes among a diverse group of schools. The PACERS schools, all K-12, range in size from the 500-student Cedar Bluff school whose community started as a Cherokee Village (and is now becoming a high-tech center) to the 130-student Monroe school at Packers Bend reached by ferry across the Alabama River. The themes that emerged from the first plans organized the PACERS work:

- *Genius of place*—engaging students in the study and documentation of their own communities
- *Sustainable communities*—involving students in the work that keeps communities going
- *Joy*— involving students in celebrating and contributing to the cultural and aesthetic life of the community

- A cooperative of small rural schools dedicated to integrating schools and communities in order to assure that each remains viable and able to contribute to the economy
- Uses a variety of projects that link students to their communities and enlist students, educators and citizens in fostering school reforms that capitalize on the strengths of rural life
- Has joined student learning and community development through community newspapers written and published by students, community history projects, and student-run projects that revive or add to rural skills and opportunities

The plans submitted to the PACERS project from the communities center on these three themes. A series of meetings sponsored by the cooperative in the communities, or regional clusters of them, pull together interested persons—mayors, teachers, school administrators, parents and other citizens. They help each school in the cooperative develop an annual plan; requests for funding are submitted before the annual meeting of ACCESS. The ACCESS board looks at the planning documents and decides what can be funded from its resources each year.

Support for the community newspapers, which were started and are run by students, places high on the list of priorities. These are not just school newspapers, but community newspapers reporting on news and information for rural communities that Chalmers notes are often "disenfranchised even from the county seat." Students decide on the content, write stories and produce the newspapers with desktop publishing software. They have even scooped the mainstream press on stories several times. One paper organized resistance to a natural gas pipeline that was scheduled to run through the county and across the school campus; the project is now on hold.

> ***"Our best achievement is that we are continuing to demonstrate the vitality of rural schools and communities in Alabama."***
>
> Jon Chalmers

The number of community newspapers grew from 11 in 1994-95 to 19 in 1996-97; circulation doubled last year to more than 22,000. Copies are mailed to all residents and are available at businesses and offices. More than 300 students from the PACERS schools produced the newspapers last year, using profits from advertising to pay for publishing or to upgrade equipment.

The newspapers fulfill the need to engage students in discovering the "genius of place" in their communities. One high school also is publishing a cultural magazine for rural teens. A dozen schools sponsor a photography project in which students take photos for the newspapers, yearbooks and county newspapers; organize publication of student photographs; and sell their work to their communities.

Communities planned several projects with students to develop their work skills and enhance community life. Students build housing, run an aqua culture center and greenhouses, conduct community health inventories and test water systems, and established a print shop and a computer-repair firm with clients nationwide. Two schools are "recapturing" local skills through a school farm and an animal husbandry training center. This Rural Skills Development project, says a PACERS report, "springs from the motivation of rural teachers and community residents to honor their own economic and cultural traditions and reconnect their young people to them." Local farmers serve as advisors.

Finally, students are finding ways to express and celebrate their cultural heritage. Each school sponsors an annual book show, and community residents use expanded libraries to read to children. The drama project encourages students to turn community stories and histories into plays, and a music project also draws upon the life stories of community residents. The latter project became a recording released by Smithsonian Folkways. One

school created a community park with a nature and exercise trail, bog garden, and rock pool.

All of these projects are designed to provide students with academic content. The park project, for example, gives students opportunities to study changing ecosystems, classify aquatic plants, discover food chains and webs, and record the hatching and development of birds and fish. The parks, aqua culture units, greenhouses, and gardens serve as living animal and plant labs and are the contexts in which the PACERS Cooperative and PRSR are exploring more effective, relevant and rural ways of learning math and science. The labs also use and extend important local knowledge of many community members.

PRSR "does a little bit of everything to support the communities," according to Chalmers. "But mostly we listen a lot. The real work is school-based." A major undertaking of the cooperative is an electronic network, not modeled after an urban-style superhighway, but distinctly rural, "grounded in local planning." For example, there are home pages for schools, communities and the newspapers on the web. The Front Porch on the PACERS web site is used as a community bulletin board.

A barrier encountered by the PACERS project is the disbelief by the community that renewal is possible. "Some rural communities are so accustomed to not being in charge that it takes a long process of convincing them this is a good thing," says Chalmers. The project has learned that the best way to win people over "is to constantly celebrate in a very public way the results of community-school collaboration."

# Howard High School in South Dakota

Most conversations about rural education turn to saving schools because they are central to the vitality of rural communities. At Howard High School in Howard, South Dakota, students are learning how to save their community. The two are inexorably tied to each other, of course, but in this tiny, 200-student high school serving several communities in Miner County, it is the school that is taking the lead on reawakening a way of life that has been ebbing away.

- An initiative to integrate the school and the community in order to keep the community viable and a place where young people want to and can remain
- Uses collaboration with groups and people, offers a community center where students and adults learn and work together, involves students in the history and issues of their "place"
- Has made young people aware of the values of rural life, planted the seeds of advocacy to protect it and given hope of renewal to a threatened community

Miner County is home to fewer than 3,000 people, almost all of them small farmers. The largest employer in the county, a small manufacturing plant, has only about 100 employees on its payroll. Incomes are modest at best—more than 50 percent of the households earn less than $20,000 a year. Young people not needed to help run the family farms usually leave after high school and don't return. In this year's graduating class of 39 students, for example, only 2 percent of the students are expected to stay in the county.

However, students at Howard and residents from all over the county may have something to help turn things around. The school is the recipient of a grant from the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal at South Dakota State University, funded by the Annenberg Rural Challenge and the Kellogg Foundation. With $25,000 a year for three years, the school has been able to make long-range plans for revitalizing community life.

One of the first projects undertaken by students and teachers established a Rural Resource Center in the high school building for community groups to use and where youth and the elderly can work together. During the 1996-97 school year, the Center featured research by students, art work and memorabilia on five themes ranging from the harvest to church histories. Two longtime community residents decorate the Center appropriately for each theme and help do some of the research. Three-day open houses for each theme brought the community into the school to see what students had learned and written about the heritage of their county. The Center also provides a place for conversation. Once, residents and students sat down together to talk about the welfare of the elderly in the county.

The Howard school administrators and staff already had begun to instill a sense of "place" in the students before they received the grant. Students conducted a cash flow project to find out what was spent on goods and services in the county. Their report told the community that if everyone spent just 10 percent more within the county each year, $2 million would be generated locally.

In Mary Stangohr's English III class (junior English) students read "Broken Heartland" by Osba Gray Davidson, a history of the farming heartland of Iowa and a warning about the demise of small family farms. Even though they know about the daily life of farming, many of the students were unaware of the threats to small farms and communities. Some of the students' comments follow: "I learned how quickly small towns are becoming ghost towns," and "I didn't realize how badly we farmers were being ripped off," and "Coming from a family farm, every day is scary when you don't know whether or not we'll be farming within the next 10 years."

From discussions about the issues in the book, the students decided on several research projects. They studied the depletion and pollution of the Ogallala aquifer; wrote songs, poems and short stories; and created video documentaries. The students participated in communitywide discussions about issues from the book, then presented their questions, recommendations and a copy of the book to Senator Tom Daschle. They also sent the same materials to the Secretary of Agriculture and to the President of the United States.

Through mini-grants from the university's rural program, teachers helped connect schools and communities in several ways. One class published a brochure of local services and businesses, the art room acquired a computer and software to provide graphics services to the community, and a journalism class compiled written and recorded histories.

The university's rural program is creating a network of schools in South Dakota dedicated to "developing schools as places that support democracy, social justice and community sustainability," says Larry Rogers, associate director. "We want students to have a choice of what their futures will be like."

For the students, staff and involved community residents taking part in Howard High School's initiatives, the first year of their work under the grant has been heady and exciting. Stangohr, center director Randy Parry, and the principal (now superintendent) Jim Lentz wrote at the end of the first year:

*"The changes occurred slowly at first. The changes came as a result of people . . . being reeducated and empowered through talking and reading. People learned about their local culture, their local heritage, and their local circumstances. The changes have come in the form of a renewed curriculum, a school that has become a gathering place, a faculty that has become community experts, a citizenry that has become school experts, and there has been a wake up call issued to the community. The call has sounded something like: 'You better learn what you are about, you better learn how to live together well, you better learn how to sustain what it is you call your community, and you better get at it soon, for if you don't, nobody else will, and all will be lost.'"* The Center will continue to involve students in themes, says Parry, but even greater school-community links are planned for the upcoming school year. Students and community members will come together in a half-dozen general meetings for brainstorming about community renewal and education initiatives; they will read resources together in smaller groups monitored and documented by students. A greenhouse project will give students chances to do soil research, and they are designing housing for the elderly. A troubadour will work with the students over several weeks to compose songs about the community and people and then present them at a community gathering.

"This is a way for all of us to get a picture of what it means to farm and to feel good about the place where we live," says Parry. "We have to believe in our place because this county is fading fast."

# Design Issues: For Funders

Whether it is the nature of the work—community renewal—or a natural evolution among foundations, the funders at the Chicago conference made it obvious that more often foundations are seeing their investments in communities as creating partnerships and building relationships. That was the same message articulated by those seeking community-based school reform from the "trenches." The discussions brought this point to the front that the work is by "us," not by "them and us." The panel of funders emphasized:

- **Funders see their work as developing the capacities of those in communities who have the commitment and organize the power to make things better.** *"We fund change, not charity."*

- **Community-based school reform requires a long-term commitment.** *"We are in the middle of a five-year program that is about sustaining relationships. We decided that our education resources would target areas where we already had ongoing relationships, built up over the 40-year history of the foundation."*

- **Decisions about what work funders will do often are based on what they learn from being "close to the ground" in communities.** *"We convened task forces, commissioned resource studies and had regional meetings that formed an advisory committee, all to help us decide what direction we should take in program areas."*

- **Funders have obligations, such as to trustees, timetables and a responsibility to show results that grantees often do not appreciate.** *"Community organizing is open-ended, unpredictable. Most foundations work very deliberatively, prescriptively. . . . How do we bring these things together?"*

- **Funders may base much of their work around theories of change the big picture that may not match the needs of communities.** *"Foundations build their program thrust around theories of change, which makes the work narrow, focused and categorical. At the same time, communities are demanding more integrated, less categorical support that builds on shared strengths."*

CONTINUE

To fund long-term partnerships in support of community organizations involved in organizing.

## Design Issues: For Funders

When it came time for funders "to define their work," the values and priorities they gave to community-based school reform aligned to a large extent with those who work directly in schools and communities. When funders were asked what is central to their involvement in community renewal and school reform, they frequently described characteristics of relationship and partnership building. Time and money are essential to those at the grassroots. Funders need time to find out if money is well spent and results in significant change.

Moderated by Kent McGuire, who was the program officer of Pew Charitable Trusts at the time, the panel of funders included:

**Beverly Divers-White**, Vice President, Foundation for the Mid South

**Jack Murrah**, President, Lyndhurst Foundation, and chair, The Rural Challenge

**Mary Gittings Cronin**, Executive Director, Piton Foundation

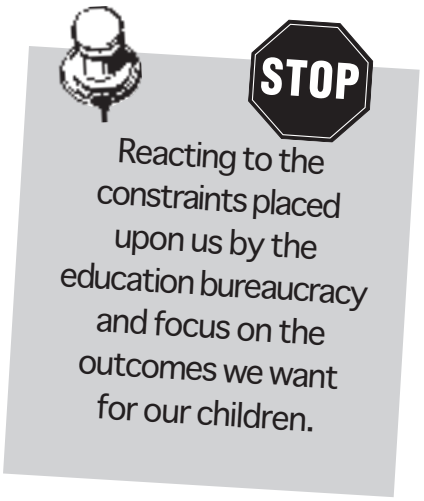
**Regina McGraw**, Executive Director, Wieboldt Foundation

## What do you support and how is it framed?

The Foundation for the Mid South is a young, operating foundation, started in 1993 to create comprehensive community change growing out of the efforts of the Delta Partnership, which focused on workforce development. It quickly became obvious, said Beverly Divers-White, that to make things better in impoverished rural communities "you need to expand resources that are there. You cannot count on New York companies coming down to provide good jobs." The foundation focuses on leadership development in education and communities, supporting expansion of medium-sized businesses and entrepreneurial training of minority populations. To have an effect on the quality of education and support for families and children, the foundation realizes it must work on improving the recruitment, preparation and development of teachers.

"We need to bring together lots of institutions in these communities, including community groups, churches and parent organizing efforts," according to Divers-White. One of the biggest issues, she explained, is that of empowerment. "We are organizing and educating parents so that when they come to the table they know the right questions to ask."

The Lyndhurst Foundation has been working on community development and education for 40 years, and has learned the importance of long term relationships, according to Jack Murrah. Its current five-year program emphasis focuses on two efforts—to reform the school system in Chattanooga and to continue its work in rural Alabama through the PACERS cooperative. Groups in these sites are not considered "organizations that come begging," he said, but are considered partners that will help leverage change over the long haul. The foundation's experiences influenced the Annenberg Challenge to establish a rural effort focused on making school reform and community development interrelated. One of the Rural Challenge's objectives is to organize student work around producing things of value for the community, "hoping to use the public nature of student work as one way of breaking down the dichotomy between education institutions and community."




The Wieboldt Foundation is known for its 75-year tradition of support for community organizing in the metropolitan Chicago area. The community-based organizations that responded to the Chicago school-reform plan had been primed for the effort largely by the foundation's investment in communities. "Organizing involved leadership, and leadership requires equality around power," said Regina McGraw. When the community comes into the schools, as in Chicago, things can happen that would not have been possible before. Today, the schools in the city that are making the most progress are those with community involvement, she said.

The Piton Foundation also is comparatively new to the scene and has a

single, entrepreneurial donor. These characteristics have allowed the foundation to take risks, to experiment and fail, said Mary Gittings Cronin. After an initiative to develop affordable housing, foundation officials decided its efforts were not tied closely enough to the community, and it reached for a new definition of community. "We went to the poorest neighborhoods in Denver and asked people whom they turned to when they were in trouble. Where was the leadership?" she said. "We learned that we were funding the wrong players, that people turned to family, friends and churches, not to schools, public agencies or community groups." The indigenous leaders were shopkeepers and neighbors, according to Cronin, and these people are now the ones who advise the foundation on funding and can identify the assets of neighborhoods. The foundation also changed from a grant-making to an operating foundation that is much more based on the relationships it is developing.

## How do you decide what you want to do?

Mid South changed the way it did business because it convened leadership in the three states where it supports programs and learned how disjointed its efforts had been. The meetings were integrated across all areas, according to Divers-White, and the discussions underscored that the foundation had separated education and economic development. Now, not only are the programs integrated but so are special projects within the programs.

At Piton, the staff directs programs, drawing its strength from research and keeping the founder and chair informed. People in the community who are the closest to problems help it do a lot of mid-course corrections, said Cronin.

Other foundations at the conference were brought into the discussion and described other strategies — researchers, scholars and other experts inform the staff, which filters the information to the board; many foundations have advisory boards or committees. According to program officer M. Hayes Mizell, grant recommendations at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation "used to be placed in a neat package in front of the trustees, but they resented this, and now there is an effort to have more of an ongoing dialogue so they understand the modifications needed earlier." Still, he said, more flexibility might be needed to make the necessary mid-course corrections. The Mott Foundation has begun to take trustees on visits to funded programs, which is an especially effective strategy for trustees who do not have an education background.

## What happens to proposals from communities?

Program officers seldom fund initiatives that they haven't been asked to fund, according to Kent McGuire. The best way to become known, he advised, is for groups/initiatives to build a

relationship, "to let them see your work." The BellSouth Foundation's guidelines for grants are intentionally broad, said Salin Geevarghese, general director of the grants program, which allows it to include many ideas and integrate them.

Grantees and potential applicants also should understand that foundations exist under political scrutiny and limits. Congressional investigations of foundations two decades ago still reverberate in philanthropic circles, Murrah pointed out, so much so "that any work that looks political can be scary to them," even though there is little reason to fear legal consequences. However, Mizell said that trustees "will fund controversial things if they are rooted in the foundation's work."


## How can community-based organizations "educate" funders not at the meeting who have abandoned education altogether or who fund only internal school reforms?

"That has to be done together," according to Cronin. Her foundation arranged for the program officer at a new foundation to visit Piton initiatives, and Piton has formed a partnership with another community foundation to pool money for education reform. According to Murrah, collaborative efforts also are underway in Chattanooga to answer such questions as: "What would Chattanooga look like if families were succeeding? What would be the indicators that chart that success over time?

What is needed to make those improvements happen?" One result is that the groups participating in the discussions (the foundation, United Way, Urban League, grassroots organizations and others) are identifying 10 markers of change. "We are taking pains to make sure we agree on what success looks like so we are working in a much more concerted way as a community."

Panelists and participants agreed that if the discussions about school reform had been limited to either school people or community people, there would have been few takers. "If I had supported changes in Chattanooga around community organizing alone, there would have been only four of us in the room," said Murrah. That is why the "work" must be an interrelationship: "No school is better than its community." Cronin said the Cross City Campaign conference had achieved more discussion across sectors than she was able to do through the Council of Foundations, which is a "hopeful sign," she added. The next step is to have discussions around indicators of success, which would open up "this kind of work to larger foundations."

Don Moore, executive director of Designs for Change, asked funders present to find ways "to help community-based education reform acquire more legitimacy. . . We need voices other than our own to talk about why it is important."

# Educational and Community Change Project

In a modest way, Paul Heckman is battling the most difficult barrier of all that prevents low-income children and families from realizing their ambitions through education. He is battling educators' perceptions that parents have little knowledge to contribute. In a sense, his Educational and Community Change Project provides the philosophical base for all efforts to link schools and communities. The Project addresses the heart of the issue—the attitudes about each other that frustrate both educators and families.

The Project sees schools and neighborhoods as one. "The district is not the unit of change," says Heckman, who began his work with one school in 1990. It is the synergy that can develop between classrooms and neighborhoods that changes the educational environment for children. Four other low-income schools in South Tucson and Tucson itself are now part of the Project, which remains both a strategy for transformation and a research effort to learn how changing attitudes affect changes in expectations and opportunities for children.

- A collaborative of five schools from South Tucson guided by a faculty member from the College of Education at the University of Arizona and community organizers
- Works inside schools to help teachers become aware of parent and community knowledge and works outside schools to build parent and community capacities to improve schools and their lives
- Is learning how to change perceptions and thus change outcomes for low-income children

Children's experiences and knowledge draw from boundaries larger than a school, but smaller than a city, Heckman believes. Those experiences help children construct what they know, but schools "treat what they know as nonexistent. In truth, they and their parents know a lot, but those who come from White, middle-class backgrounds fail to see that the knowledge and the community producing it are good." Furthermore, the Project seeks to find out what parents know and can contribute to the school rather than base relationships on improving "parenting."

Inside the school, the Project helps teachers and administrators understand "the stuff outside," says Heckman. Teachers spend a block of time each week, usually three hours, talking about what knowledge they perceive their students are bringing into the classroom, how they can bring this out and what changes they need to make. The conversations address basic beliefs and assumptions teachers make about the capacities of their students to learn and to create new knowledge. The Project provides a coordinator who moves the discussions along and works with the teachers at other times during the week as they try out new practices.

Outside the school, the Project seeks to organize parents and give individual families confidence in becoming involved with their children's schools. Again, perceptions play a role in changing relation-

ships. If parents demonstrate that they are effective and powerful, teachers will come to respect them and acknowledge that their children "know something," reasons Heckman.

At Ochoa Elementary School, the first site for the Project, parents were concerned about a bar on a corner close to the school. It took four years of work, but eventually the bar was closed. During their campaign, parents learned how liquor licenses were granted, did research on regulations and petitioned the city council. Their success more than solved a neighborhood problem. "All of a sudden," Heckman says, "teachers could see that if parents could make something like that happen, then they weren't powerless. And children could see their parents as successes, not as victims." The new relationships that resulted put teachers and parents into more equal roles.

Another example from Ochoa illustrates how the connections the school is making with its neighborhood change what is taught in the classrooms. On a neighborhood walk with her class, a teacher encouraged the children to talk about their neighborhood. They complained about a trash-filled vacant lot. The first step toward solving the problem was to engage the children and neighborhood adults in cleaning up. The initiative went further, eventually resulting in the children petitioning the city council to turn over a vacant lot next to the school for educational purposes. Students, teachers and parents transformed the lot into a small urban park and wildlife habitat with native plants where much of the school's math and science projects now take place. "They are learning these subjects in the context of what they know best," says Heckman.

These inside-outside linkages are creating school structures that are very different from what existed when the Project began. The weekly dialogues have produced a willingness among teachers to share and to organize into teams that work with smaller groups of students. At Ochoa and another school language tracking has been eliminated because bilingual and monolingual teachers have teamed up, eliminating the isolation of language minority students from the rest of the school. Cross-age grouping was introduced, teachers became less dependent on textbooks and more interested in using culturally relevant resources. Core subjects are now based largely on a consensus of what students and teachers want to learn about. Using what students "wonder about" as clues for developing curriculum, teachers build content around day-to-day topics such as food, health, money and housing. One teacher worked with students on designing an after-school and summer program based on surveys the students conducted with their peers and parents.

The Project has not focused on typical skills and does not depend upon standardized tests to prove its effectiveness. Heckman says, however, that students at Ochoa, who had been at the bottom on test scores, are now close to the mean. From the very beginning, the Project used a community coordinator to organize parents around issues and tie them to school change. Pima County Interfaith, a grassroots organizing group affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation eventually teamed up with the Project and took over the community work.

The Project, with funding from foundations, began as much as an inquiry and research initiative as an organizing one. Heckman wanted to know if a "reinvention" of school and neighborhood relationships could produce as much quality in low-income schools as exists in wealthy areas. Something had to break through the Latino despair with schooling that produces such high dropout rates and eventually an embarrassingly low enrollment rate in higher education in the state.

The Project reports that beliefs are changing, which is a goal never realized by the typical multicultural workshops teachers attend. The culture of the schools and how they are organized to teach, as well as the content taught to students, are transforming and uniting with the neighborhood. And parents are no longer powerless.

However, the Project has learned that forces larger than the neighborhood influence outcomes. When a superintendent who backed Heckman's efforts left, the Project lost advocacy within the school bureaucracy. Heckman also believes it was a mistake for the Project to give up its daily pick-and-shovel work in the neighborhood. He says the Pima County Interfaith, while expert at organizing, has a broader agenda and cannot dedicate resources to the constant contacts and attention to individual needs that must be done in neighborhoods. It also is a struggle, he says, to convince funders that the nitty-gritty tasks eventually pay off. Yet, while conceding the importance of policymaking in the larger community, the Project is focusing on what can be done when the system as a whole cannot be changed. The Project has learned that it is possible to change beliefs. Once that awareness happens, many ways to improve schools begin to flourish.

# ACORN in New York City

Just like its acronym implies, ACORN starts small. In New York City, its efforts to support low-income families in designing and carrying out school reform grew until results could be seen in actual buildings opened with staff and programs selected by parents. It also could be seen in newspaper headlines generated by ACORN's study of how low-income and minority students are "tracked out" of advanced groups beginning in kindergarten and are denied opportunities to attend the city's prestigious high schools. ACORN does not shy away from tackling tough issues and determining who is avoiding accountability.

- A community organizing effort to ensure quality education for low-to moderate-income families
- Uses organizing, parent training and data gathering/reporting to pressure the school bureaucracy to enact school improvement
- Obtained permission and resources to plan and open several small schools and issued reports on tracking that brought about changes in policies

ACORN brought its community organizing abilities to New York City about 13 years ago. It is a national organization of low- to moderate-income families who pay dues in order to support an aggressive community organization that builds power for its members. ACORN's initial work in schools was to tackle obvious problems, such as asbestos removal and other school repairs, the poor quality of school lunches, and the need to include parents in school governance. ACORN members successfully won seats on several community school boards. Although these were important efforts and ACORN greatly increased the amount of parent involvement in schools, they were not strategies that fundamentally improved the education of children. Stronger action on common problems was needed.

The ACORN Schools Office, established in 1988, began to build a power base by training leadership across the city. A majority of the 150 members on its Citywide Schools Committee are Black and Latina women who are "graduates" of ACORN training. One of the first major accomplishments was the opening of a new elementary school, P.S. 245, in an overcrowded area of Brooklyn that reduced the need for busing children across the district to another school. Parents were very involved in selecting the staff and program for this new school, and from that experience grew a strategy for school transformation in the city.

ACORN members had considered and discarded the idea of gradual change. They saw hope in a fledgling effort in the district to create teacher-run schools and wondered what could happen if parents were the driving force behind the creation of good schools. The opening of P.S. 245 in Brooklyn was significant. It inspired ACORN members to launch a campaign to start autonomous schools, mini-schools or even clusters of classrooms based on parents' knowledge about what was effective and student-centered educators' willingness to staff the schools.

Parents have now helped open two small high schools and two more are planned. With each school "we have gotten better at forcing the system to

cede more power to the parents and the community in running the school," says Steve Kest, national executive director of ACORN who works out of New York City. The Bread and Roses High School, for example, opens this September because ACORN staff responded to the distress of predominantly Dominican Republic immigrant parents in upper Manhattan. These parents were faced with having to enroll their children in an overcrowded, high truancy local high school. At the same time, teachers at a small junior high school contacted ACORN because they wanted their graduates to stay in smaller, more attentive high schools. Through ACORN's work, the parents and teachers came together, planned an innovative high school program, recruited students (there is a waiting list) and worked the system to find space and equipment. It is important to have educators with the same philosophy as parents involved from the beginning, says ACORN staff member Helene O'Brien, who helped on this project. "That eases the growing pains of a new school," she says.

Despite their success with helping parents and teachers organize new schools, this school-by-school reform is, by necessity, slow and deliberate, and therefore unlikely to meet the need for better schools for all of ACORN's members, not to mention all low-income families. ACORN members, therefore, are also working on issues that affect greater numbers of students and schools and the New York City school system itself. Good data provide the necessary tools for the members' efforts. For example, ACORN documented for state and national officials the failures of schools in five community school districts in Brooklyn to meet minimum performance standards, prompting officials to take action. A report in 1996 exposed institutional racism in the district that begins by tracking students of color and students from low-income families even as kindergartners. ACORN sent Black, Latino and White parents to the same schools and found out that:

- Black and Latino parents were permitted to speak with an educator less than half as often as White parents
- White parents were given tours of schools two and a half times more often than Black or Latino parents
- Access to information about gifted programs appeared to vary according to the race of the parent making the inquiry

This eye-opening report caused the chancellor to draft new standards for admission to gifted-programs. ACORN followed this report in May 1997 with another data-full report exposing further racism in district practices. This second report documents the effect of tracking on the chances—or lack thereof—for minority and low-income students to attend Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and other high-quality high schools. This report prompted the *New York Times* to term some of the findings "alarming" and to call on the Chancellor to intervene immediately in the city's worst schools.

"It is clear that no other organizations would have published these reports," says Helaine Doran, head of New York ACORN's Schools Office. "They challenge the status quo too much." Having racial data by school, a legacy of former Chancellor Ray Cortines, made the reports possible and will help ACORN members keep up pressure to reduce tracking.

While such reports garner wide attention, ACORN members are honing their skills at reforming local schools. Current training focuses on using Title I legislation to leverage improvements, understanding the budget process, and evaluating successful programs, such as Reading Recovery and Success for All, that could be used to start a new school. The ACORN training is formal, intensive and usually lasts six weeks.

Members need each other's support because there is resistance to parents who bring instructional issues to the table, says Doran. "It is a big challenge to ask for the Title I budget, for example, and some parents went through living hell for weeks just to get the data."

ACORN also collaborates with other organizations seeking the same reform goals. ACORN works with the Save Our Schools Campaign, the School Budget Alliance, the Parent Organizing Consortium, and the New York Networks for School Renewal funded by the Annenberg Foundation. It makes sense to come together and create a larger base of parent activists, says Doran. It is easy to engage parents in supporting the benefits of smaller, student-centered schools "but it is not as easy to engage the people who still have the power over decisions," Doran says. ACORN's organizing and information-gathering keeps the pressure on those who ordinarily might not take parent and community desires seriously.

The heels-dug-in nature of local politics presents the most formidable barrier to parents working through ACORN on school reform. Doran says the most important lesson their efforts have produced, however, is that "persistence pays off." And, she says, "It was not just the reports that nailed racist practices in the district. It is parents speaking up that counts."

The Basic Materials

The programs represented at the Cross City Campaign conference are standards for community-based reforms that can guide future work. They allowed conference participants to develop a consensus about the purpose of community-based school reform.

The discussions identified three areas that needed further analysis and consensus building in order to put exemplary ideas and collaborations into the mainstream. Small group discussions expanded on them and developed "next steps":

▶ **What indicators/measures are needed to gauge success that go beyond traditional test results?** *"There are powerful interests in the country that already have indicators in place that shape our understanding of measures. We need to have conversations about what they are, how they are used, how they need to be supplemented and how teachers/communities can articulate what they want and how to measure it. We need indicators of 'what counts' in community efforts to strengthen the education of young people."*

▶ **How do you connect and engage communities, parents, students and educators around an understanding of the purpose of school-community collaborations to improve schools and develop communities?** *"There is a lot of work going on now, but it's not coming together. To many community people, standards-based reform seems centralized, anti-democratic, heartless and test-driven."*

▶ **What are the mechanisms and strategies that will ensure that community-based school reform becomes a popular movement with the opportunity to be long-term and sustained and to spread across communities?** *"This begins with conversations, reaching out to people who may not share our thinking. . . . Are foundations ready to support such a movement and can they see this as constituency building, not organizing?"*

## The Basic Materials

After two days of discussing what community-based school reform is accomplishing and how funders see their work, the participants turned to the priorities that surfaced during the conference. These were:

- accountability;
- engaging and convening; and
- creating and sustaining a movement.

## Accountability Measures

The issue of measuring "the work" cropped up continuously throughout the conference. In the small-group discussion that focused specifically on accountability and measurement of results, there was general dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of current measures, especially the total dependence on student test scores. Although they acknowledged that an increase in student achievement is the ultimate goal of reform efforts, they felt strongly that achievement is more than test scores and should include additional ways to assess learning as well as other measures of community and leadership development.

Developing indicators for educational progress has a history, while creating indicators for community-based support does not. Some schools and communities are beginning to put the two together in ways that can be measured. For example:

- In Grand Rapids, parents were helped to organize as a group and to organize their thoughts, which became a set of 25 indicators. "When you are working with parents, the outcomes they want are pretty clear. They want better schools," said Beth Dilley, but the process of deciding how to go about it is the important community component.
- In Philadelphia, the ultimate goal is increased student achievement with indicators on a continuum. On one side of the scale are outcomes on standardized tests or increased preparation for college, but on the other side, said Gary Rodwell, are equally important indicators such as "changed relationships between parents and teachers and between students and teachers within a school."
- The Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago involved students at new schools in organizing themselves to avoid the creation of gangs. In the schools where parents were active and organized, the effort worked because "kids saw their parents in relationships with teachers and other parents," said Nancy Aardema. Other indicators useful to deciding if the association's work is succeeding include the number of parents going back to school and finding work, a decrease in discipline problems and "if we are having fun together," she said.


Other indicators discussed included: Are schools and communities coming together and having conversations around the needs of children? Is the bureaucracy reorganizing to include communities? Are there changes in teacher practice from passive to active learning? According to Paul Heckman, the debate over accountability is one of values. "If relationships are of value," he said, "it is possible to measure them, even though understanding the outcomes is difficult."

Despite the awareness of the need for broader indicators than currently used, the group acknowledged that the existing political context gives extraordinary weight to test scores. "All of us are using achievement test results because of political pressure," said one foundation representative, even though the best reason for having indicators is

to make mid-course corrections. "All of our conversation says we want indicators that are multiple and complex, but we are being asked to produce simple measures," said David Dodson.

"All of the richness we have unpacked in the last few days is difficult to deal with. How do we find a political proxy for what we consider important—a community that is democratic and students who are whole in mind, body and spirit?" The group agreed there needs to be a broad set of outcomes, a broad set of measures, a sub-set of outcomes for public consumption and process measures for diverse outcomes. "Maybe, in some real-world experience there is an opportunity to try to work on hammering out how one would put some of these measures into play and how you communicate them to others," Hayes Mizell of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation said.

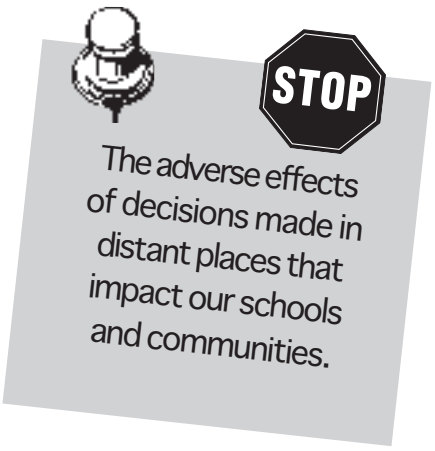
## Convening Around Reform

Local conversations about these issues are the way to get people engaged in community-based school reforms. "The goals of education belong to the community itself," reported the discussion group on engaging and convening around community/school collaboration. However, although it insisted that decisions about schooling and goals for children must be made close to communities, the group also acknowledged, as had the group on indicators, that such decisions are not always in the hands of local communities. For example, "taking on the testing companies," it pointed out, "is like taking on the tobacco companies."

For those who participated in the small-group discussion on creating and sustaining a movement for community-based reforms, there was an agreement on urgency. There are growing negative forces such as vouchers, takeovers and recentralization through standards/testing that detract schools from reflecting democratic ideals.

## Creating and Sustaining a Movement

Community-based school reform is not anywhere near being a movement at the moment, but action to create it is needed now. This would focus on: developing a language for it that is comfortable for all involved, obtaining foundation support within communities to bring others to the table, and encouraging discussions within and across affinity groups within the foundation community that lead to bigger conversations. The effort also needs to identify who should be connected to a movement—parents, faith communities, educators and key organizations.




The movement should begin by organizing working groups that develop plans, present them at future meetings and build on the knowledge base through site visits.

Summing up the discussions, Jack Murrah, president of the Lyndhurst Foundation, noted that school reform currently is not owned by parents and the public but, rather, is more a concern of business and government leaders. A constant theme at the conference, he said, was the many ways it was made evident that "public education is not public. . . . For some, it is sufficient for schools to be paid for by taxpayers and run by an elected board. For most of us in this room, that definition falls far short."

It was his perception that urban communities see schools as too isolated while rural communities see schools as being too insulated. In both cases, however, they are both shielded from their constituencies. But many of the successful examples of schools and community working together that were presented at the conference have found that "making student work more public serves to help the community see the value of the school." Unless schools are more public, in his opinion, "They will never be successful institutions."

He asked the conference participants: "Can we learn from each other? Can we work on what it means to lower this wall between school and community?" And, added David Dodson, "Let's keep the focus on what is working and why."

The participants obviously had begun to fulfill his description of strong schools and strong communities that opened the conference one thing they can do is answer the question: "What is the future we want?"

Digging the Foundations

Last, the conference participants worked on what needs to happen next. This process is a "work in progress" but to begin the process, the group identified next steps. These points fell into three categories:

1. The need to develop indicators of success for community-based school reform;
2. The ability to access and provide information;
3. The need to organize a movement.

## Next Steps

**We need to develop indicators of success. . .**

- Develop success indicators beyond standardized test scores that can measure progress in student achievement and school/community change so that funders, schools and community members all are on the same page.
- Create a true paradigm shift to an environment in which parents, students, communities and schools are equally valued.
- Be willing to break the mold and challenge the status quo in how schools view communities and vice versa.
- Be prepared to explore and consider adopting different definitions of education.

**We must work on accessing and providing information. . . .**

- Educate community and school constituents about each other's goals and strategies through access to the learning opportunities within each sector.
- Foundations should share their knowledge of "best practices" research with communities, and communities should share their knowledge of emerging "best practices" with foundations.
- Continue to build a knowledge base about what counts in this work of community-based school reform, what evidence exists and what resources are needed to do the work.
- Build the capacity of parents to assess the effectiveness of their schools and to work constructively for school improvement.

**We must work on organizing a movement. . .**

- Focus on creating an infrastructure for change where one doesn't exist and on sustaining them where they do exist.
- Bring the educational establishment into the conversation.
- Establish a commitment from funders to identify two or three additional foundations that should be informed about the work and a commitment from community organizations to engage two or three other such organizations not currently involved in education reform.

# Vital Schools, Vibrant Communities

*"Good organizing is always about rediscovering the richness that is already there...In communities, there is always more there than anybody knows. Mutual rediscovery of the fullness and abundance that characterizes both schools and communities changes each others' conceptions."*

*"The critical social invention of the 21st century should be a social mechanism whose job it is to find and mobilize the gifts of people in the community. This is not just school reform or community organizing, but a revitalization of democratic postulates."*

John P. Kretzmann
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Throughout both urban and rural America, school reformers and community builders are beginning to discover each other. Mutual interests and benefits abound. On the one hand, community organizers work to re-situate the school at the center of the community development process. On the other hand, creative school reformers activate community residents and resources as vital partners in the educational enterprise. These two growing movements recognize the powerful advantages of bridge building.

The following brief observations are meant to serve as discussion-starters for people who are exploring the school-community bridge. How did schools and communities grow apart? What characterizes the separate cultures of "school" and "community?" What is the shape of current efforts to rebuild strong ties between the two cultures, ties that benefit both schools and communities? What approaches appear to be most promising for the intertwined goals of strengthening education and building more vital communities? What can communities contribute to schools, and vice versa?

As school reformers and community builders probe new possibilities for creative collaboration, it may be helpful to recall briefly some of the historic factors that contributed to the separation of so many schools from their immediate communities. This short look at the past will provide a basis for understanding some of the challenges and possibilities evident today, and for suggesting a few ideas for strengthening the bridge in the future.

## Schools and Communities: The Past as Problematic

During the later nineteenth and through at least the first half of the twentieth centuries, both urban and rural schools were inextricably linked with the communities that surrounded them. Parents, community residents, employers and educators knew generally what roles were assigned, and what to expect of each other. Schools had important but relatively circumscribed functions as socializing agents and labor-force preparers. Those young people who, for whatever reasons, left school early were absorbed into lower-skilled jobs, or into the agricultural work force. For the most part, schools and communities understood each other, and supported each other's functions and roles.

But in almost every city neighborhood —and, for somewhat different reasons, in some smaller towns and rural areas as well— schools and communities have grown apart over the last half century. In fact, in many areas, schools and their local communities now constitute separate, often mutually mistrustful worlds. Understanding at least some of the factors contributing to this divorce is critical if the rift is to be closed. While no one on either side of the divide raised the wall consciously, its construction represents an important, if unintended, consequence of the development of modern schooling.

Historically, the rise of professional education and the increasingly professional definition of the school has altered the power relationships between schools and communities. Formerly, some school "outsiders"—employers, political and community leaders, etc.—wielded considerable influence over the school's personnel and practices. With the development of the professional class and ethos, power shifted significantly. Clearly, decisions were now in the hands of those who were credentialed, and who knew better. This shift in decision-making authority was accelerated and reinforced by the racial and class differences that often divided the professional educator from the immediate community. In many rural

communities, severe economic crises and the movement to consolidate smaller schools also contributed to this separation. The establishment of a professionally defined class of educators also meant that the school became increasingly "institutionalized" in the manner of many other modern professions such as medicine, law, etc. This professional institutionalization led, in turn, to an increasing separation from the more voluntary impulses of "community." This separation of institution from community as "types" is deep and profound. At the risk of overstating and oversimplifying this dualism, and recognizing that the contrasts are never this pure, think for a moment about these "two cultures."

Below are a few of the characteristics that distinguish "institutional" problem-solving techniques from less formal "community" problem-solving techniques.

These sketchy comparisons, which obviously exist in real life on a continuum, should serve to highlight some of the reasons that formally organized schools and less structured communities often have difficulty understanding and working with each other. The differences evolved over time, and now represent divergent strengths and weaknesses.

| Characteristics | Institution | Community |
|---|---|---|
| Structure: | Formal, hierarchical, compartmentalized | Informal, circular, flat, open |
| Participation: | Paid | Unpaid/Voluntary |
| Operating System: | Rules, efficiency | Processes, participatory |
| Ways of Knowing: | Surveys/studies/ quantified data | Stories and anecdotes |
| Staff Roles: | Gate keeper, professional provider | Broker, facilitator, advocate |
| Power orientation: | Control | Consent |
| Role of racial/ ethnic identity: | Suppressed | Emphasized, celebrated |
| Aura: | Cool, distant | Warm, familiar |
| Focus on people as: | Needy, deficient, clients, students | Gifted, participants, leaders, citizens |

## A Legacy of Distrust

One legacy of these historic developments is the still prevalent tendency of both schools and communities to regard each other, from a distance, with a great deal of distrust. Each has developed a sharp eye for the weaknesses of the other. Thus it is not difficult to find professional educators who characterize communities, including parents and other residents, as ignorant "amateurs," hardly qualified to contribute systematically to the growth of young people. In addition, the communities outside the school often appear to be unpredictable and messy. Racial and class prejudices can contribute to a pervasive wariness, even fear. Finally, school professionals often experience community activists as expecting far too much from the school, and as appreciating their hard work far too infrequently.

This legacy of distrust is, of course, a two-way street. Parents and community leaders often regard the schools within their neighborhood as fortresses that are intimidating and closed to their participation. Even when entry is gained, community residents frequently report encounters with inflexible, bureaucratic procedures that are often reinforced with racially and culturally inappropriate attitudes and responses. These barriers are substantial and powerful obstacles to community participation. When such barriers are stacked upon a parent's own painful memories of failure in school, they become virtually insurmountable.

## A Present Filled With Possibilities

Given this legacy of mutual distrust, it is particularly noteworthy that the present moment is one in which creative change agents in both school and community settings are probing new possibilities. Put simply, creative school and community leaders are discovering that they *need* each other. Both worlds face daunting challenges. Only by exploring creative ways to strengthen each other can schools regain their vitality and communities rebuild themselves.

What do these promising current experiments look like? Michele Cahill, in *Schools and Community Partnerships: Reforming Schools, Revitalizing Communities*, has scouted the territory, and has helpfully catalogued five clusters of activities that are defining new school-community collaborations:[1]

- **Services Collaborations: From Individual Programs to Comprehensive Integrated Services.** This approach concentrates services for young people in the school setting.
- **Schools and Community as Educational Partners.** In this approach the ties among students' homes, schools and communities are strengthened through joint activities and programming, often highlighting and celebrating the cultural and racial backgrounds of the families.
- **Schools and Communities as Partners in Youth Development.** These strategies involve a range of community and school-based partners in activities that build the competencies of young people so that they can become ever more effective and knowledgeable actors and citizens.
- **Schools as Assets for Community and Economic Development.** This approach recognized that schools are in fact valuable "treasure chests," filled with the physical, spatial, financial and human materials out of which stronger local communities and economies can be built.
- **New Schools/New Governance: Community RedefiningSchools.** Here Cahill recognizes that many of these emerging collaborations inevitably led to restructuring. Stolid bureaucratic governance systems are beginning to give way to more democratic and inclusive arrangements at the level of the local school and community.

Taken together, these current probes into new school/community relationships provide a substantial launching pad into the future. Schools and communities have entered into a mutually transformational process, and if the creative experimentation continues, both will emerge stronger and more democratic.

## The Future: Strengthening Ties Between Schools and Communities

Where might the promising work of the present lead creative educators and community builders? What are the underlying attitudes and jointly held agendas that are now becoming recognizable, and that hold promise for the future?

As schools and communities reconnect, leaders in both arenas begin to transform the ways in which each regards the other. School leaders, for example, might begin to think of the entire community as an extension of the classroom, filled with skilled and knowledgeable residents with teaching and learning agendas and capacities of their own. Parents and community residents often represent particularly rich cultural and racial/ethnic resources which are critical for building respect and understanding.

School professionals might also develop an appreciation of community organizations and residents as potentially powerful political and economic allies, ready to support the school in its quests for resources and authority. Such a partnership sets the stage for mutually beneficial investments in each others' futures.

Similarly, community leaders have already begun to rethink their conception of "school." They might develop further the idea of a school as a "treasure chest" filled with riches to invest in

[1] Cahill, Michele (1996). *Schools and Community Partnerships: Reforming Schools, Revitalizing Communities*. Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, Chicago, IL.

community building—available space for community meetings and events; purchasing power to support existing local businesses, or to seed new enterprises; equipment and materials that could be critical resources for neighborhood development; talented adults (teachers) who might be constructively connected to community groups and agendas; and most important, energetic young people, often eager to contribute to community building projects.

Out of these new sets of attitudes will surely emerge newly defined, jointly held agendas and priorities. These cooperatively forged efforts will join educational goals with community building and teaching/learning with development. Here, for example, are six critical agendas which schools and communities could address more powerfully together. Each agenda is, in fact, already being explored in both urban and rural contexts.[2]

1 Schools and communities could strategically address the challenges of economic development, enterprise and job creation. School and community resources could be combined to invest in and rebuild local businesses, and could be linked for market studies and job training. Both students and teachers could be productively connected, as apprentices or trainers, to the world of work.

This important work has begun in a number of settings. The Public Education Fund in Grand Rapids, Michigan, links students to local business owners. In Rutland, South Dakota, students planned and now operate a convenience store; similarly, Chicago's Lucy Flower High School features four student-run enterprises at the center of a community-wide Youth Enterprise Network. And PACERS of Rural Alabama has helped students build housing, open a print shop, and operate a computer repair business.

2 Schools and communities working together could greatly expand the educational resources and opportunities available to students. Parents and community residents represent rich stores of knowledge and experience, often just waiting to be tapped. Community spaces, both natural and human-made, invite study and understanding. The growing experiences educators are developing with "service learning" reconnect community building work with sound educational objectives.

Examples of these approaches proliferate. PACERS, for instance, has helped students start and operate 19 community newspapers which offer real-life laboratories for developing reading, writing and analytical skills. In Tucson, nascent scientists study wildlife in a new park that community and school leaders, along with young people, built on the site of a former garbage dump. And in South Dakota, as well as on Chicago's West Side, students learn from businesses they operate themselves.

3 Schools and communities could cooperatively acknowledge and address racial, ethnic and gender conflicts and tensions. They could work together to confront racism, to empower people of color, and work to build bridges across current divides. Schools might become the center of community celebrations of race and culture.

Among the committed pioneers addressing these agendas are the ACORN parents, teachers, and students in New York, who have produced powerful studies of racial "tracking out" and other clear injustices. Many others are working to re-inject cultural content and celebration into the center of both curricula and community life. Interesting examples include the Coalition for Improved Education in South Shore's (Chicago) "African Village" project, El Puente's (New York) significant cross-cultural organizing efforts involving the Latino and Hassidic communities, and Tucson's Educational and Community Change Project, which revalues the knowledge and culture of Latino parents.

[2] Most examples cited are from *Building Bridges: Eight Case Studies of Schools and Communities Working Together*, Cross City Campaign and from Cushman, Kathleen, "What Rural Schools Can Teach Urban Systems," *Journal of the Annenberg Challenge,* Summer 1997.

4 Schools and communities could invent together new and more powerful forms of local authority to leverage outside resources from, for example, government or the financial sector. With schools as powerful partners, community organizations could significantly expand their already impressive leverage and bargaining capacity.

These new forms of authority are already emerging through the powerful organizing efforts of groups like New York's El Puente and ACORN, and the Industrial Areas Foundation's Alliance Schools Initiative in Texas and the Southwest.

5 Schools and communities could create together new institutions and ventures which ensure that local citizens join together to solve problems, e.g., through skills banks, small business incubators, neighborhood technology centers, community forums, community cultural celebrations, etc. Each of these ventures represents enormous potential for realizing both educational and community building goals.

In the Appalachian Copper Basin, for example, students, parents and educators have opened a 160-acre environmental education center; while many groups, such as Chicago's Logan Square Neighborhood Association, have transformed parts of local schools into community centers. In many communities, both rural and urban, schools are becoming once again the focal point for community planning and problem-solving.

6 Finally, schools and communities working together could help to restore a meaningful, shared "sense of place." This rootedness —the feeling that this community is unique, important and belongs to us—is the foundation on which vibrant schools and communities rest. Too often, in both rural and urban America, this sense of place is missing, or much weaker than it was. Clearly, this restoration of a sense of place is already at the center of many school/community agendas. It is critical to Howard, South Dakota, where students, teachers and residents moved from a study of their threatened community's history to a sophisticated campaign to save the area's family farms. It is equally important for El Puente's Brooklyn neighborhood, to South Tucson, to Appalachian small towns, to the Texas—Mexico border. In each of these communities and in scores of others, reclaiming *this* place as *ours* links schools and communities in powerful new alliances.

Recognizing the enormous potential for schools and communities to work more powerfully together raises urgent practical questions about both resources and leadership. These six sets of strategies and examples represent an immensely promising start. But to grow these efforts and to build others, visionary educators and creative community builders will have to work together both to free some part of existing resources and to reach funders.

And who will lead the inventive organizing processes that will call these still fragile partnerships into ever more powerful activity? Where are the school/community leaders who will focus the partners on each others' assets and potential contributors? Who will work incessantly to see that racism and classism are exposed and overcome? Who can help convene people across existing barriers, creating new space where educational and community building agendas are melded? Where can we find the leaders who will find new leaders?

These leaders will no doubt emerge from very different sources in different communities. Many kinds of skills are needed. In some cases, perhaps, these are challenges for a new kind of school/community organizer, a facilitator/mobilizer who understands both worlds, and whose skills can be directed toward bringing those worlds together in new and powerful ways. Though not the only relevant set of attributes, certainly the core skills of an experienced community organizer will be critical (see appendix). Beyond those, perhaps, what's needed most are dreamers and visionaries.

## Appendix

For the past forty years or so, many of the most effective community builders in urban America have called themselves "community organizers." Today, an increasing number of these trained change agents are working with schools and school reformers. For that reason alone, it might be useful to recall some of the critical skills that good organizers bring to the community. Clearly, these are not the only skills needed; nor are professional organizers the only people who have them. But perhaps these skills could be utilized even more extensively and effectively to build the school/community partnerships of the future. Among their many skills, good organizers know how to:

1. **Discover "natural leaders,"** people whose stature and skills may not be visible to a broader public, or to school leaders, but who have a respectful following within the community.
2. **Develop and train leaders**, providing tools and experiences that build peoples' competencies and confidence.
3. **Interview skillfully, listen attentively,** utilizing a set of basic "one on one" interviewing techniques, good organizers establish trusting relationships, uncover what people care most about—their "self-interest"—and what makes them angry. Increasingly, organizers also discover their subject's skills, capacities and hopes for the future.
4. **Analyze and decode power relationships,** researching and clarifying for citizens how lines of authority work, where responsibility lies, and who has the capacity to act.
5. **Transform a "problem" into an "issue,"** thus making a condition about which people complain into a situation that people can analyze, act upon and change.
6. **Build "strategic alliances,"** strong but often temporary relationships with other organizations whose interests coincide and whose resources can contribute to the success of an action or a campaign.
7. **Organize and carry out effective "actions"** and other public events that dramatize a community's issues and push forward its larger agenda or campaign.
8. **Link small "victories" with larger goals and strategies,** thus keeping hope alive in the short run and commitment strong for the longer haul.
9. **Build and sustain an effective organization,** one that reflects participants' interests, remains flexible as contexts change and continues to mobilize and develop local leadership.
10. **Evaluate and learn from experience,** inviting leaders and other participants to assess virtually every meeting or action, and to look for ways to improve in the future.

# Building Bridges: Funders and Community-Based School Reformers Conference

**September 28-30, 1997, Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, Illinois**

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